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# FROM the DESK OF...

**U**NLIKE LAST YEAR'S event, which also spanned two nights, this year's WrestleMania garnered almost universally favorable reviews. There are several likely reasons for that. For one, rather than taking place in the sterile environs of the Performance Center, this year's show marked WWE's long-awaited return to a stadium setting. Even with fewer fans in attendance than usual—and despite night one's inconvenient rain delay; *darn you, Mother Nature*—WrestleMania came across far bigger and brighter to fans and pundits watching at home.

Why did this year's 'Mania prove so much less divisive? Well, the presence of fans certainly helped. Even if it wasn't always the reaction WWE may have liked, the cheers and boos emanating from the 25,000 fans in attendance on each night made the televised event decidedly less awkward than last year—covering up chatter between those in the ring, while offering extra shots of adrenaline to the athletes as they took each bump and mounted comebacks.

Apart from the addition of fans, WrestleMania 37 benefited considerably from the subtraction of gimmicks. Sure, we saw the somewhat surreal match between Randy Orton and The Fiend, the cagematch where 51-year-old Shane McMahon was predictably brutalized, and the half-baked Nigerian Drum Fight (which wasn't bad so much as forgettable). But, apart from those outliers, it was pretty much a back-to-basics wrestling show with precious few shenanigans.

On Twitter, former Freebird/current WWE Producer Michael Hayes remarked that the main event of night two, which saw Roman Reigns retain his Universal title against Edge and Daniel Bryan, was the first 'Mania headliner in many years where no one kicked out of a finishing move. Of course, Hayes was then corrected by scores of fans, who correctly pointed out that they'd also seen this happen in the main event of night one, in which Bianca Belair defeated Sasha Banks to win the Smackdown Women's championship.

Still .... think about that for a second. At WrestleMania 36, the WWE championship and Universal title bouts clocked in at a combined six-and-a-half minutes. Yet, there were loads of false finishes. At WrestleMania 37, the Universal title bout alone lasted more than 22 minutes, with the Smackdown Women's title match clocking in at over 17 minutes.

Also of note: With the exception of Edge—who proved his mettle via an inspiring performance in the 2021 Royal Rumble—none of the world title bouts featured so-called “part-timers” like Brock Lesnar or Goldberg.

And the WWE championship match that opened night one was a hard-hitting heavyweight battle—the company's bread and butter. It featured two big, bad men clobbering each other in a match that appeased many an old-school fan. And the finish, which saw Bobby Lashley defeat Drew McIntyre by submission (a knockout, if we're being technical), felt like the coronation of “The All Mighty” Lashley as a top star.

Longtime fans also got a glimpse of something familiar during the aforementioned rain delay. With time to fill as torrential rains pounded Tampa's Raymond James Stadium, WWE called on some of its top talkers to participate in backstage interviews that were noticeably unscripted. Rather than coming off rushed or unrehearsed, these interviews largely felt much more natural and authentic than the fare we've grown accustomed to seeing each week on TV.

Could this looser, more spontaneous approach be something we'll see more of in the future? Even if not, it was good to see WWE offer a sports entertainment product that had something for most fans—even those for whom the term “sports entertainment” is a four-letter word.

**Kevin McElvaney**  
Editor-in-Chief

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## KENTA

NJPW star KENTA shocked the world by showing up on *Dynamite* to attack Jon Moxley. For analysis of AEW's increasingly wild partnerships, turn to Brian Solomon's "The Lockup" on page 16. And, for a full synopsis of KENTA's career to date, check out his "Capsule Profile" on page 56.





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**COVER ART:** LAUREN MORAN

**COVER DESIGN:** LAURA BRUBAKER

**ORIGINAL PHOTOS BY:** KENNY OMEGA – LEE SOUTH/AEW  
LIO RUSH – HARRY AARON/MLW  
MAKI ITOH – YUICHI KOJIMA  
BOBBY LASHLEY –  
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# BEFORE the BELL

COMPILED BY MIKE BESSLER

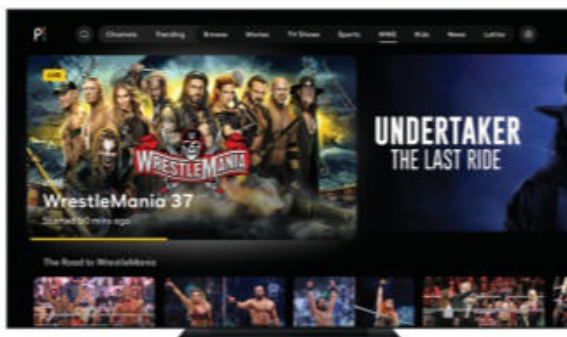
## MEDIA REVIEWS

### WWE ON PEACOCK

**W**e were all so much younger and idealistic way back in 2014. Those were the days when Bitcoin traded at under a grand, “pandemic” was just a word in the dictionary, and we believed that the fledgling WWE Network would deliver programming via their independent platform until that fateful hour when CNN finally cued up “Nearer, My God, To Thee.” But it turns out that creating and managing an entire network is pretty complicated. Thank goodness NBC stepped up to ensure the continued existence of the WWE Network by folding the whole shebang into their own streaming service, Peacock TV.

Granted, it’s different. Some of the changes are cosmetic, including the main user interface. It’s not better, and it’s not worse. It’s more like a dream where you’re in your childhood home, you walk through the kitchen and discover you’re standing in your bedroom, and then your cat barks hello. The terminology is a bit awkward, too. For example, pay-per-views are still indexed by year, but each year is called a “season.”

Then, of course, there’s the edited and removed content. Think of it as self-censorship, as opposed to



institutional censorship. After all, nobody’s going to get thrown in jail for watching a crappy old DX sketch. And improvements in cultural sensitivity and decency aren’t really a bad thing, all told.

For all the wailing and gnashing of teeth, WWE on Peacock isn’t too far removed from what fans have grown accustomed to, although there will surely be an adjustment period. Even the \$4.99 tier with all its commercials—boy howdy, are there commercials!—brings an important element of choice into the picture for consumers. Considering the depth of content on the greater Peacock platform, including sitcoms, movies, and new programming, it may become less likely that WWE fans will rush to cancel their subscriptions after a single bad pay-per-view.

WWE on Peacock is still a work in progress, but it remains one of the most innovative, convenient, and affordable sources of wrestling-themed entertainment. We give it four out of five suplexes.



### STARRFIRE: THE ASHTON STARR STORY

**U**p-and-comer Ashton Starr shares his personal journey with unique candor in this mini-documentary, filmed and edited by Nathan Mowery and produced by Kind Punk. With heartfelt emotion, he recounts the milestones of his life and career to date, from his birth to his debut match for AEW, as well as his first-ever appearance in the *PWI* “500.” This short film includes footage of in-ring action from some of Starr’s most noteworthy bouts against the likes of Effy and Corey Hollis, plus special comments by Sonny Kiss. **Four and a half out of five suplexes.**



### LADY WRESTLER



**D**ecades before WWE laid claim to the concept of a “Women’s Revolution,” a brave band of African-American women stood up to prejudice and sexism in an effort to bring tolerance and inclusion to the world of professional wrestling. Through archival footage and interviews, *Lady Wrestler* is the story of how passion for athleticism and performance became intimately entwined with the struggle for social justice and equality. While regrettably absent from much of the historical canon constructed by industry leaders, the efforts of women like Ethel Johnson, Ramona Isbell, Marva Scott, and Babs Wingo are paid worthy tribute through this documentary. **Four out of five suplexes.**



# TALKIN' TRASH

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related items you've been talking about lately and our gut reaction to each:

## 10. Dalton Castle re-signs with Ring of Honor.

Negotiations with his entourage went less smoothly, as The Boys couldn't agree on whether they should be paid in peacock feathers or sequined booty shorts.

## 9. The Young Bucks threaten to delete their Twitter account ... again.

In response to the warning, meme superstar "Condescending Willy Wonka" replied, "Stop. Don't. Come back."

## 8. WWE rolls out the new slogan, "Then. Now. Together. Forever."

It's a slightly pared down version of the language on workers' contracts, which reads, "Together. Forever. Until we wish you luck in your future endeavors."

## 7. Inclement weather postpones the start of WrestleMania's Saturday night card.

Thankfully, the rain delay finally provided an answer to the longstanding question, "What does Samoa Joe look like in a rain poncho?"

## 6. Triple H suggests that he has one more WWE run left in his career.

Not to be outdone by his son-in-law, Vince McMahon said he has a few runs left as well, then noted that they're typically twice per night, and straight to the bathroom.

## 5. Alexa Bliss seemingly betrays Bray Wyatt.

Wyatt probably should have seen Bliss wasn't a team player after he caught her trying to coax Huskus the Pig Boy into a container labeled "Ham Salad Fixins."

## 4. Chris Jericho publicly teases a return to WWE.

Because headlining pay-per-views and hosting special shows on your own cruise ship is great, but nothing compares to the thrill of an extended mid-card run.

## 3. William Shatner joins Rob Van Dam, The Great Khali, and others in the WWE Hall of Fame.

Asked to explain why he chose Shatner for this year's group, Vince McMahon muttered, "I just wanted to finally stick it to that stuffy know-it-all, Jean-Luc Picard."

## 2. Roman Reigns pins both Edge and Daniel Bryan to retain the Universal championship.

The simultaneous pinfall garnered accolades and cover stories from niche publications such as *Popular Multitasking* and *Overachievers' Home Journal*.

## 1. Bianca Belair wins the Smackdown Women's title at WrestleMania.

As a result of her loss to Belair, Sasha Banks' status as "Legit Boss" was subsequently downgraded to "Assistant Manager."



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# WE HEARD THAT!

"I want one more match before I'm done, and WALTER is one of those guys. He needs to be put in the Hall of Pain."

— **WWE HALL-OF-FAMER MARK HENRY**, from an appearance on *BT Sport's The Run*

"I think what Impact and AEW are doing is groundbreaking. This partnership has changed the landscape of professional wrestling. And, being a women's wrestler, I went to advocate for women's wrestling to be a part of it."

— **IMPACT KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION DEONNA PURRAZZO**, on the *All Night Long Wrestling Podcast*

"I think that it shows Vince McMahon isn't afraid of AEW at all. Because, if he was, he wouldn't allow that to happen."

— **CM PUNK** to *TMZ Sports*, regarding Chris Jericho's recent appearance on *WWE's Broken Skull Sessions*

"I do have that goal to unite our country. And I also feel that if this is what the people want, then I will do that."

— **DWAYNE "THE ROCK" JOHNSON** to *MSNBC's Willie Geist*, regarding his potential political aspirations



## ONE TO WATCH: HEATHER MONROE

Leave it to a bombshell named Monroe to turn heads and get folks talking. Much like the late, great Marilyn Monroe, squared circle standout Heather Monroe melds her talent and charisma into a unique persona that captures the attention of audiences and rivals alike. But this “Killer Bae” isn’t on the scene to walk the red carpet and pose for paparazzi—Heather Monroe is ready for action.

At the age of 11, Monroe discovered wrestling on her own, and was immediately transfixed by dynamic performers such as Lita, Trish Stratus, and the Hardys. She began hosting pay-per-view parties and grappling with her friends on the trampoline in her backyard. Before long, she became convinced that she had a future in wrestling.

“When I first started watching, I was like, ‘This is what I want to do,’” she recalled.

Although she remained a wrestling fan through her younger years, Monroe focused on acting after graduating with a degree in theater and cinema. She moved from her home in Iowa to Los Angeles, in search of acting opportunities. But she was again drawn to pro wrestling after watching WrestleMania 30 with friends.

Monroe subsequently discovered the Santino Brothers Wrestling Academy in Bell Gardens, California, and enrolled as a student in 2014. She trained under Joey Kaos, Robby Phoenix, and Los Luchas. While learning the ropes, she noticed similarities between the worlds of acting and pro wrestling.

“It’s not super different,” she told *PWI*. “We’re all competing against one another, but we’re also friends. We get to perform and share our art.”

Monroe worked her first official match in 2015, then landed a unique opportunity to work as part of a lucha libre act that opened for a side project of Tool frontman Maynard James Keenan. The lengthy tour of the United States, Europe, and Oceania afforded her the chance to perform frequently, honing her in-ring skills.

Upon returning to California, Monroe quickly put her experience to good use, working matches for numerous promotions throughout the region and landing opportunities in SHIMMER, RISE, and even a short bout against Nia Jax for WWE in early 2017. Since then, she has continued to perform extensively throughout Southern California, and she has also stepped into the ring for Ring of Honor, Impact Wrestling, AAA, and All Elite Wrestling. Along the way, Monroe has captured championship gold in promotions including Sabotage Wrestling and Hurricane Pro, and logged wins over the likes of Taya Valkyrie, Renee Michelle, and KC Spinelli.

The “Killer Bae” supplements her training and experience in lucha libre with technical maneuvers and striking attacks. She does quite a bit of damage with favorite moves like the dragon suplex and a springboard codebreaker, but it’s her devastating “Bad B\*\*\*h-inoku”—a Michinoku Driver variation—that has vanquished so many of her opponents. And, if they won’t go down for the three-count, Monroe finishes her rivals with a submission move that she calls “The Seven Year Stretch.”

Now a seasoned performer with big-time aspirations, Heather Monroe is poised to make professional wrestling both her career and her way of life.

“I’m ready to be seen,” she proclaimed. “I’m done being in the background and being a ‘best kept secret.’ I am ready to be anywhere and everywhere.”



PHOTO BY JUSTIN COTTERELL/ELECTRIC SLEEP IMAGES



## MASTERS OF MAYHEM

Imagine if Rip Van Winkle was a diehard wrestling enthusiast, just rejoining the ranks of fandom. Sure, he'd be thrilled to amble down the mountain and discover that he can now watch pretty much any wrestling event from any era via a supercomputer that fits in the palm of his hand. But just *maybe* there'd be a small part of him still pining for the unassuming charm of the old days in which he'd spend Friday evenings at "ye old video shoppe," perusing racks of VHS tapes in the wrestling section and thoughtfully weighing which tape was worth the two-dollar rental fee.

Chances are, ol' Rip might have taken *Masters of Mayhem* home for the weekend more than once during those bygone days. Released in 1990 by American Video, *Masters of Mayhem* showcases some of the biggest stars from Angelo Poffo's International Championship Wrestling and Jerry Jarrett's Continental Wrestling Association. Virtually every hand-picked bout on the videocassette was a barnburner, from a title-for-title meeting between Tommy "Wildfire" Rich and Rick Rude to a chaotic row in which Lanny Poffo and Randy Savage battled the Rock 'n' Roll Express. The Road Warriors, Jerry Lawler, Austin Idol, Junkyard Dog, and many other old-school masters lay down some serious smack in



a smorgasbord of scintillating contests, including a 20-man, two-ring "Slamma-Bama-Rama." Say that last one three times fast.

Sadly, far too many personalities from this collection have since passed—some of natural causes and others well before their time. In this respect, a video collection like *Masters of Mayhem* is an animated time capsule that brings the past into the present, even if it's just for 90 glorious minutes.

## THE BRIGHT SIDE OF THE RING

*All too often, tragic and unfortunate events cast a pall across the world of professional wrestling. Fortunately, there are plenty of inspirational moments and admirable achievements that outshine wrestling's dark side. Here are just a few rays of sunshine from a brighter place:*

As of mid-2020, John Cena had granted over 650 wishes to sick children through the Make-A-Wish Foundation, making him the most prolific celebrity volunteer in that organization's history.

In 2015, Chris Hero wrestled nine different opponents in a three-hour gauntlet match to raise \$3,500 for ALS Canada, a charity assisting those afflicted with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease.

**ECW Originals Tommy Dreamer and Beulah McGillicutty have been married for almost two decades. The power couple are the proud parents of twin girls.**

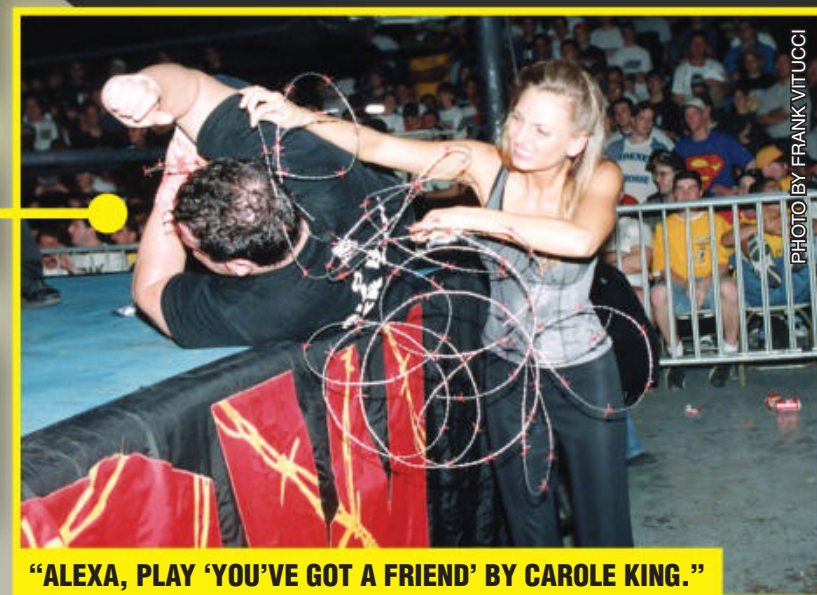
Sami Zayn, who is of Syrian descent, has partnered with the Syrian American Medical Society to establish and operate a mobile medical clinic in the war-torn country. As of late 2020, the clinic had provided over 4,000 medical services, including many life-saving procedures.



AEW star Thunder Rosa has a degree in sociology from UC Berkeley and previously worked at a substance abuse treatment facility.



The late Curt Hennig saved the life of baseball star and close friend Wade Boggs when Boggs was injured during a hunting trip. After Boggs became entangled in a barbed wire fence and began bleeding profusely, Hennig freed him and carried him almost a mile to a truck, ultimately taking him to a nearby hospital. Recounting the tale years later, Boggs referred to Hennig as his "guardian angel."



"ALEXA, PLAY 'YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND' BY CAROLE KING."



# RINGSIDE

WITH HARRY BURKETT

**"H**AVE WE USHERED a brand-new era in the world of pro wrestling, or have we just opened Pandora's box?!" Guest commentator **Mauro Ranallo** posed that pointed question at the end of a very consequential pay-per-view, Rebellion, as **Kenny Omega**—the champion of AEW, AAA, and now Impact Wrestling—celebrated in the ring with AEW President **Tony Khan**, Impact Executive Vice President **Don Callis**, and former Bullet Club running buddies **Karl Anderson** and **Doc Gallows**.

Meanwhile, an obviously shaken Impact VP **Scott D'Amore**, like the rest of the industry, absorbed the new reality and tried to process the ramifications. Perhaps

Khan and Callis have an idea where this compelling storyline full of real-life interpromotional intrigue is going, but the rest of us aren't clued in yet.

The main event of the April 25 pay-per-view, live from Skyway Studios in Nashville, was an instant classic reminiscent of a big match at the Tokyo Dome. AEW World champion Omega tried to impose his international stature immediately, dictating a slower pace and taking some arrogant shots, including cavalierly stepping on **Rich Swann's** back after an exchange.

The trajectory of the bout was typical Omega, steadily warming up the tempo to a boiling crescendo by the 15-minute mark ...

and the Impact champion met the AEW champion move for move, hold for hold. In the closing minutes, Callis provided several distractions as Impact referee **Brian Hebner** and AEW official **Aubrey Edwards** struggled to work together and maintain order. Then, Omega went into trademark overdrive, nailing Swann with a total of four V-Triggers before finally catching him with a One-Winged Angel to win the Impact World title.

Just like that, Omega became the most decorated professional wrestler in the world.

Also of note at Rebellion: **Josh Alexander** emerged triumphant in the incredibly fast-paced opener, besting **TJP** and defending champion **Ace Austin** to capture the X division championship. Alexander, perhaps best known for his anklelock, utilized the piledriver against both TJP and Austin, and used the maneuver to pin Austin for the one-two-three.

I expected Impact to give Alexander this kind of golden opportunity. It might seem somewhat embarrassing if Alexander's

Kenny Omega celebrates with his associates, the Good Brothers and Don Callis, after defeating Rich Swann for the Impact World title.



PHOTO COURTESY IMPACT WRESTLING





After being put on separate brands, The IIconics floundered as singles acts. Both women numbered among the names of released talent during WWE's latest round of mass redundancies.

former partner, **Ethan Page**, were perceived to be enjoying greater success in AEW. Yet Page, who was poised to become a breakout singles star, is now teaming with **Scorpio Sky** as Alexander enjoys his first big taste of singles glory in the United States. Congratulations, Josh.

In other bouts, Knockouts champion **Deonna Purrazzo** defeated **Tenille Dashwood** ... World tag team champions **David Finlay** & **Juice Robinson** beat Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows ... **Trey Miguel** won a Last Man Standing match against **Sami Callihan** ... **Jordynne Grace** & **Rachael Ellering** defeated **Kiera Hogan** & **Tasha Steelz** for the Knockouts tag team title ... **Brian Myers** beat **Matt Cardona** in a fight between former friends ... **Eddie Edwards**, **Willie Mack**, **Chris Sabin**, & **Eddie Edwards** beat **Joe Doering**, **W. Morrissey (Big Cass)**, **Deaner**, & **Rhino**.

card ... because, fortunately, WWE no longer has a monopoly over the industry. And certain talent will roll the dice and may even realize greater stardom elsewhere.

This macabre ritual is now an expected event. This year, it was known as Black Thursday.

On April 15, 2020, WWE claimed the COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary to release some two-dozen superstars, ranging from **Rusev (Miro)** and **EC3** to **Eric Young** and **Lio Rush**. On April 15, 2021, after record-high TV rights fees and the elimination of live-event touring expenses boosted WWE to its most lucrative year ever, the company announced the releases of several more wrestlers.

Samoa Joe was the biggest surprise. The 42-year-old never seemed to truly live up to his potential in WWE, despite winning two NXT championships and two U.S. titles. A run as world

Impact Wrestling capitalized on the buzz created by the Rebellion PPV by putting all eyes on its Slammiversary event in July, releasing a message on social media with the tagline "The World Has Changed Again," complete with images of **Samoa Joe** among other former WWE stars, which takes us to another matter.

It's sort of like WWE's annual draft, the Superstar Shakeup, but the opposite. Instead of talent receiving new opportunities, they get their pink slips. Others consider it their "Get Out Of Jail Free"

champion eluded him during his three-year active stint on the Raw and Smackdown rosters. Nagging injuries began to mount in late-2019, he suffered a head injury during a commercial shoot in early-2020, and he was suspended for 30 days due to a Wellness Policy violation. Joe landed a full-time gig as color commentator on Raw, replacing **Jerry Lawler**. WWE's medical team refused to clear Joe for in-ring action, due to continuing concussion concerns.

Joe seems particularly suited for runs in either Impact Wrestling or AEW because he earned his reputation largely outside WWE, in TNA, Ring of Honor, and Japan. As with most of the talent on the release list, he must honor a 90-day non-compete clause, which ends at about the time of Impact's Slammiversary.

Let's take a look at other casualties.

**Billie Kay** and **Peyton Royce**: These two suffered greatly when The IIconics were forced to split after a loss to The Riott Squad. Kay was relegated to comedy annoyance on *Smackdown*, which is always bad for long-term career prospects (see **Jillian Hall**). Royce was taken slightly more seriously on Raw, but her singles in-ring work didn't shine, compared to her tag team work with Kay. They're sort of the female version of Karl Anderson and Doc Gallows, who recovered their reputation in Impact Wrestling. That may be a good option for the former IIconics, too.

**Tucker Knight**: He got the **Marty Jannetty** treatment, didn't he? Creative completely failed Heavy Machinery, a tremendously popular team that was harmed by the lack of live audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Otis**, too, is floundering in **Chad Gable's** Alpha Academy, despite his centerpiece storyline with **Mandy Rose** last year. Otis lost Mandy, but at least he didn't lose his job.





**Chelsea Green does battle with Dr. Britt Baker at 2018's All In event. One of the more surprising releases on WWE's "Black Thursday," Green shouldn't have too much trouble landing on her feet elsewhere.**

**Kalisto:** He seemingly came out of nowhere to make WWE fans forget about international star **Mistico**, who never gained traction as **Sin Cara**. Kalisto went on to a much greater career in WWE, winning the U.S. and cruiserweight titles, and, in a first in WWE history, portraying a heel luchador. It's hard for masked luchadors to repackage themselves under new identities in the States (see Sin Cara), so his release is disappointing.

**Chelsea Green:** This was a bit of a surprise, considering Green

wife could end up in the NWA.

**Bo Dallas:** Despite showing in-ring promise in FCW and NXT—and displaying charisma as a disingenuous motivational guru early in his WWE run—Dallas didn't really get a chance to prove himself. And his Raw tag title reign with **Curtis Axel** didn't serve him well, as they were literally promoted as a "B-Team." It's a shame. Couldn't **The Fiend** have used a little brother?

**Mojo Rawley:** His high-energy persona suffered from a disconnect with the fans. His heel tendencies showed much

had gained solid experience in Impact and NXT, but literally a bad break—a broken wrist during her *Smackdown* debut last fall—kept her off television and prevented her from proving why she belonged in WWE. Green's release was met by a tremendous outcry on social media, where she has cultivated a considerable following.

**Mickie James:** This was *not* a surprise. WWE has established a tradition of bringing back veterans to serve as mentors in the ring and locker room, but this almost never translates into championship success for the older stars—and they all seem to have limited stints. James, however, had a respectable four-year run. While successful in Impact Wrestling before her return to WWE, I have a feeling that **Nick Aldis'**

more promise, but that died from creative neglect. Maybe **Rob Gronkowski** can get him a job with the Buccaneers.

**Wesley Blake: The Forgotten Sons** are forgotten. **Jaxson Ryker** was pulled from TV last summer after his controversial social media posts drew the ire of colleagues and fans. But he was one of **Shane McMahon's** henchmen in Shane-O's 2021 feud with **Braun Strowman**. **Steve Cutler**, who reportedly infuriated **Vince McMahon** by attending a New Year's Eve party during the COVID-19 pandemic, was unceremoniously released in February. Blake, who seemingly had no issues with HR, now joins Cutler as an ex-WWE performer.

While some specific details of WWE's billion-dollar deal with NBC Universal's Peacock are hard to come by, there's no doubt that WWE's agreements with NBC Universal and Fox helped them thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic. During WWE's first-quarter conference call, new WWE President **Nick Khan** noted that Peacock executives voiced their appreciation for the two-night WrestleMania 37 extravaganza—the most successful event in the streaming service's brief history.

Chief Brand Officer **Stephanie McMahon** credited **Bad Bunny** and his appeal with Hispanic audiences for part of WrestleMania's success. Said McMahon, "Notably, all *Raw* appearances featuring Bad Bunny showed an increase of 31 percent in the Hispanic persons 18 to 34 and Bad Bunny's total social impressions during the time of his storyline equaled nearly 700 million."

That's how Stephanie expresses her happiness in corporate speak.

This 'n' that: **Miro** indicated he's getting serious about becoming a factor in AEW, tweeting, "You got a title, you got a problem." Finally, Miro! ... **Jim Ross** confirmed that





This photo collage of Captain Ed George (Ed Farhat Jr.) was sent to our editorial offices by his father, the original Sheik, back in 1978. Sadly, Farhat Jr. recently passed away at the age of 71.

AEW will resume touring in front of live crowds in July ... The NWA's latest pay-per-view, *When Shadows Fall*, will take place on Fite TV on June 6 ... EC3 has been hospitalized for a serious infection for over a week as of press time. Best wishes to you, EC3.

A neighborhood park in Ross Township, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, was named after perhaps its most famous resident, the great **Bruno Sammartino**. The former WWWF champion's widow, **Carol Sammartino**, was in attendance for the dedication, along with his son, **Darryl Sammartino**. "Dad is up in heaven now, along with my brother Danny," remarked Darryl. "And he said to Danny, 'Look at this, I'll be damned.'"

Sammartino lived in Ross Township from 1965 until his death in 2018.

I'd like to share some notable passings before we part. **Barry Orton**, uncle of **Randy Orton** and younger brother of **Bob Orton Jr.**, died of an undisclosed illness on March 18 in Kansas City, Missouri. He was 62. He was best known as **Barry O**, a preliminary wrestler for the WWF in the

early-1980s. Orton courageously spoke out against sexual harassment in the WWF and throughout the industry, even appearing on the talk show *Donahue* in the early-1990s.

Other deaths include "**Pistol**" **Pete Marquez**, who maintained the Los Angeles scene in the 1970s and early-'80s along with greats such as "**Wildman**" **Jack Armstrong** and **Buddha Khan** (age 65); **John da Silva**, who wrestled at the 1956 Winter Olympics and held the New Zealand version of the NWA British Commonwealth title on six occasions (age 86); **Tedd Webb**, a prominent radio personality in the Tampa Bay area who tirelessly promoted pro wrestling and even served as a manager on occasion (age 72); **Ed Farhat Jr.**, the son of **The Sheik**, who wrestled as **Capt. Ed George** in Detroit (age 71); and **Mark Bujan**, a noted wrestling historian in the Motor City, who, ironically, wrote Farhat's obituary for *Slam! Wrestling* only weeks before his own death (age 61).

That's all for now. Save a ringside seat for me. □

## NEWS ANALYSIS

### KING OF THE WORLD

Kenny Omega must be an early frontrunner in this year's *PWI* "500," in my opinion. The AEW-Impact World title bout at *Rebellion* was the most intriguing Champion vs. Champion match of all-time: No cheap double-DQ or double-countouts, it wasn't a scenario where one promotion was obviously overtaking another, and we're on a journey where we don't know the final outcome. Is this really Rich's swan song, or will he mount a comeback?

### CORPORATE MORALITY?

We've heard a lot about corporate responsibility and corporate consciousness, but does that extend to layoffs? Does it matter that WWE released several performers after their most lucrative year ever? Or during a pandemic? Or is it simply responsible corporate governance, keeping the company fiscally healthy? I think the answer to the last question is yes, but we have every right to critique the wisdom of some releases.

### TRIBUTE TO "DA BRUNE"

About 100 local officials and residents were on hand to rechristen Sangree Park, located outside Pittsburgh, with a new name: Bruno Sammartino Park. Bruno and Carol Sammartino became Ross Township residents in 1965, although son Darryl disclosed that a mansion was available to Sammartino on Long Island at the time. The Sammartinos chose a quieter life, however. Thumbs up to the residents of Ross Township!

### SON OF SHEIK

We'll learn more about Ed Farhat Jr. in the 2022 biography of his father, *Blood & Fire: The Unbelievable True Story Of Wrestling's Original Sheik*, written by our own Brian Solomon. My understanding is he was complicated, much like his dad. It's amazing that Farhat Jr. competed at Cobo Hall as Capt. Ed George, and very few of those in attendance realized he was The Sheik's son. Those were dark and mysterious times, weren't they?



# QUICK COUNT

BY AL CASTLE

**F**RIENDS, THE ICONIC sitcom about a group of buds living, working, and dating in New York City, has found new popularity two decades after it aired. In addition to a planned HBO reunion, a *Friends*-themed museum is set to open this summer in Manhattan.

That means New Yorkers will have a better chance of seeing up close the leather pants that Ross once wore before they can see the ones that Seth Rollins still dons.

I'm not sure what they're feeding the smelly cat, but I do know what I'm feeding you: this *Friends*-inspired edition of Quick Count.

## HOW YOU DOIN'?

I attended WrestleMania this year because I really missed seeing live wrestling. What I didn't realize until I got there was how much I missed seeing live wrestling fans.

More than just keep us away from ringside, the COVID-19 pandemic has also kept us away from each other for more than a year now. And, like a good concert or movie, pro wrestling is the kind of entertainment that is enjoyed the most when it is shared with others.

And so, whether it was sharing a knowing smile with someone wearing the same classic wrestling T-shirt as I was, or commiserating with a similarly soaked fan as we waited for the rain delay to pass in the concourse of

Raymond James Stadium, it felt good to be around my people for the first time in more than a year (while keeping a safe social distance, of course.)

## I'LL BE THERE FOR YOU

Between Hulk Hogan co-hosting and Bad Bunny making his in-ring debut, another special appearance may have gone underappreciated during night one of WrestleMania—that of Big E.

Despite being on a different brand than his New Day

brethren—and being booked to wrestle the following night—Big E made it a point to walk to the ring with Kofi Kingston and Xavier Woods for their Raw tag team title defense against AJ Styles and Omos.

In an industry where on-screen friendships are almost always tenuous, and betrayals are common, the lasting bond between the New Day's members has been one of WWE's most redeeming portrayals in recent years.

"It can be easy in this business to be selfish and to just worry about your own push, but I love the fact that we're always so genuinely supportive of each other," Big E said in a recent interview with Renee Paquette (Renee Young).

Given the beatings all three men took at WrestleMania, I'm sure they were grateful to each have a couple shoulders to lean on.

## PIVOT!

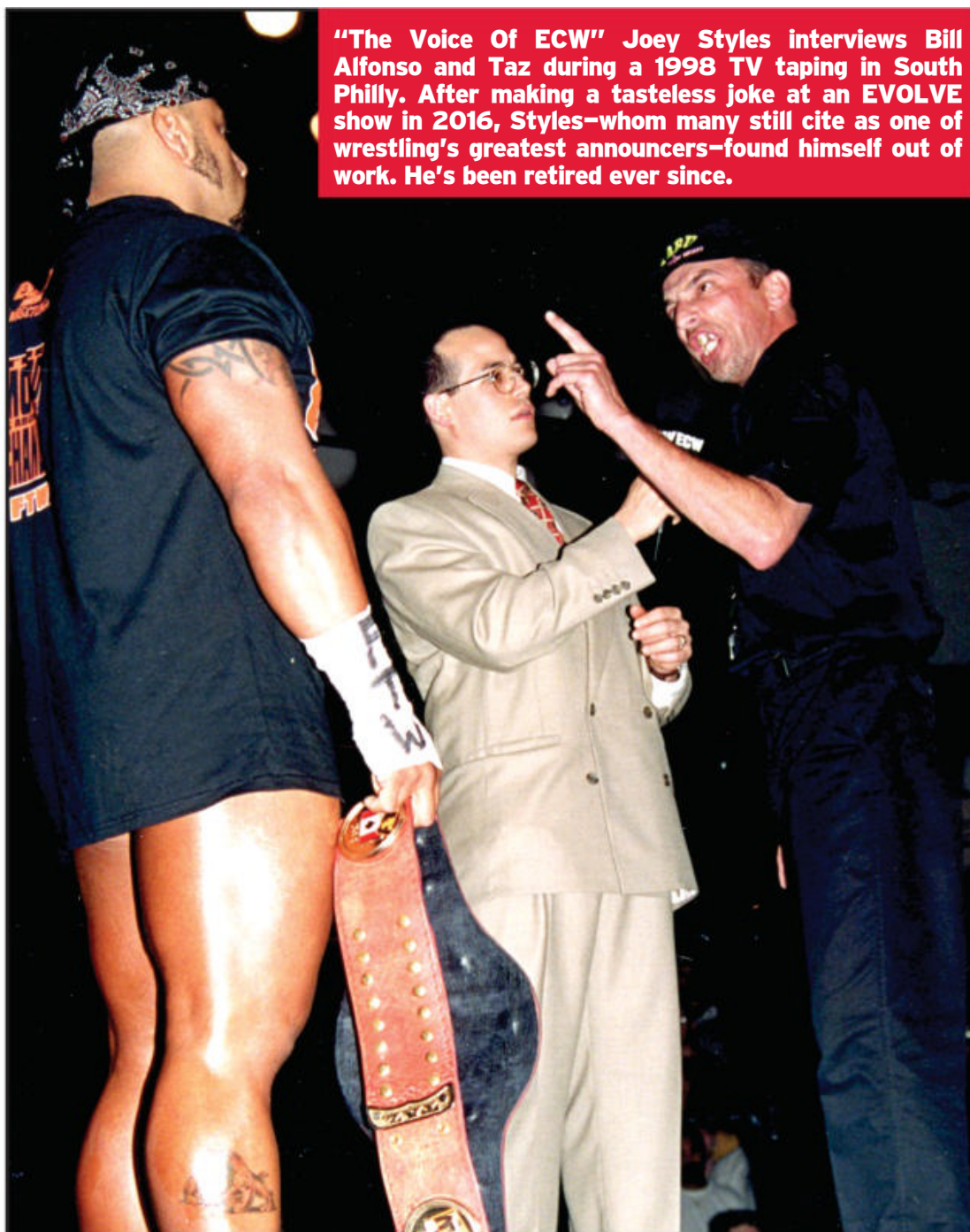
Following its WrestleMania climax, WWE typically resets with



While he could've just stayed home and prepared for his Intercontinental title defense the following night, Big E jumped at the chance to introduce his New Day compatriots, Kofi Kingston and Xavier Woods, on night one of WrestleMania.

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**"The Voice Of ECW" Joey Styles interviews Bill Alfonso and Taz during a 1998 TV taping in South Philly. After making a tasteless joke at an EVOLVE show in 2016, Styles—whom many still cite as one of wrestling's greatest announcers—found himself out of work. He's been retired ever since.**

new storylines and directions for its top stars. After beating Daniel Bryan at WrestleMania 35, WWE champion Kofi Kingston turned his attention to Kevin Owens. After beating Brock Lesnar at WrestleMania 36, WWE champion Drew McIntyre turned his attention to Seth Rollins.

And, after beating McIntyre at WrestleMania 37, WWE champion Bobby Lashley turned his attention to ... Drew McIntyre?

WWE seemed more reluctant than usual to turn the page following this year's big show. The company went as far as rehashing the "WrestleMania" brand for its subsequent pay-per-view event, now dubbed "WrestleMania Backlash," which looked likely to feature several rematches from the "Showcase Of The Immortals."

I enjoy leftovers as much as anyone. But, even after a delicious meal, sometimes you just want something different for dinner the next night.

### **WE WERE ON A BREAK**

In my last column, I wrote about what was at stake as the National Wrestling Alliance returned to television following a year-long hiatus caused by the pandemic. With so many stops and starts in the NWA's story over the last 30 years, I worried that, unless Billy Corgan hit a homerun with his latest relaunch, the revered NWA brand could be doomed.

It may not have been quite a homerun, but the NWA hit a solid double with its Back for the Attack pay-per-view and latest season of its weekly *Powerrr* series. Nick Aldis remains the prototype

for a confident and gifted world champion, while supporting players, like Trevor Murdoch, Aron Stevens, and Kamille have stepped up to fill the void left by the departure of several stars.

Even without a live audience, Corgan and his team have continued offering the satisfying mix of competent booking, familiar faces, hungry up-and-comers, and nostalgia that has kept many fans loyal to the NWA brand all these years.

### **OH. MY. GOD.**

There's been a lot of shuffling of announce teams on our favorite wrestling television shows in recent months. AEW hired Paul Wight to provide color commentary for its new *Dark: Elevation* show. WWE ditched Samoa Joe and Tom Phillips, and picked up Adnan Virk and Pat McAfee.

All the new additions bring something to the ringside table, but I can't help but wonder why one of the most influential voices of the last 30 years remains in retirement: Joey Styles.

But for a brief stint on the independent circuit in 2016, Styles has been largely absent from view since stepping away from the WWE commentary table in 2008.

In his prime, Styles' signature mix of smug sarcasm, insider smarts, and over-the-top enthusiasm helped make ECW the revolutionary force it became in the mid-1990s. Even Eric Bischoff revealed in a recent podcast that he was eyeing Styles as the new voice of WCW when he planned to buy and relaunch the company in 2001.

Of course, Styles' own missteps played a hand in his exodus from the wrestling business. But, if Tony Schiavone can be one of wrestling's most respected announcers in 2021, I've got to think there's a place for Styles, too. □



# THE LOCKUP

BY BRIAN SOLOMON

**W**RESTLING PROMOTERS ARE generally not a cooperative lot. In fact, the history of the business is strewn with the casualties of promotional wars, petty infighting, and general antipathy. Perhaps that's why wrestling fans tend to cherish times when competing companies actually play nice with each other—especially because it's so very rare. And yet, over the past couple of years, All Elite Wrestling has not only been cooperating and cross-promoting, they've been making it a major part of their entire strategy—leading to an exciting era of interpromotional activity that fans of major league American pro wrestling almost never get to see. In fact, one could argue it's pretty unprecedented.

This strategy has been the talk of the industry in recent months, but it's actually nothing new for Tony Khan's company. Shortly after AEW was first formed—months, even, before *Dynamite* debuted on TNT—the company had already announced its first partnership with the esteemed Mexican promotion, Lucha Libre AAA.

This included appearances by Cody Rhodes, The Young Bucks, and Kenny Omega at AAA's

TripleMania 27, as well as a victory by Omega for the AAA Mega championship, which he currently still holds as of press time after a year and a half as champion (the longest AAA World title reign in nearly a decade).

But that didn't even have a discernible influence on AEW programming, so much as the other way around. This changed in August 2020, when Thunder Rosa brought her NWA World Women's championship to *Dynamite* for the first time, signaling a partnership between

AEW and the United States' oldest pro wrestling organization. Thunder Rosa quickly became one of the highlights of AEW programming, and the partnership continued after she lost her title to Serena Deeb. Since then, talk has persisted of NWA World heavyweight champion Nick Aldis hitting AEW, perhaps to face his old rival Cody Rhodes one more time.

All this was just a warmup, however, for the industry-shaking events that took place on the December 2, 2020, edition of *Dynamite*. For a couple of weeks leading up to Jon Moxley's defense of the AEW World title against Kenny Omega, Impact Wrestling EVP Don Callis had been raising a whole lot of eyebrows by appearing alongside Excalibur, Jim Ross, and Tony Schiavone on commentary. Little did fans know that it was all leading up to Callis revealing his secret support for Omega, whom he helped to take the AEW World title belt from Moxley in



Thunder Rosa attempts a submission on Hikaru Shida at AEW's All Out PPV in September 2020. The reigning NWA World Women's champion at the time of her AEW debut, Rosa mounted the first serious threat to Shida's AEW Women's title reign.

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW





**Is this real life? New Japan's KENTA and AEW World champion Kenny Omega exchange looks following their main-event victory over Jon Moxley and Lance Archer on the February 10 edition of *Dynamite*.**

notorious fashion and abscond with it to Impact.

Before long, Omega was parading around Impact TV with the AEW strap. It was a mind-blowing crossover, with the world champion of one company appearing for another company, ultimately culminating in a Champion vs. Champion match at Impact's Rebellion PPV. Something once unthinkable had happened—full cooperation between arguably the second- and third-most prominent wrestling groups in the U.S.

In February, the next major crossover happened when KENTA—thriving in New Japan Pro-Wrestling after languishing in WWE—made a surprise appearance on *Dynamite* to sneak attack Jon Moxley, the NJPW United States champion. It was later revealed that this was all part of yet another interpromotional cooperative; Moxley had already been competing for New Japan prior to signing full-time with AEW, and New Japan officials had cut a deal with Tony Khan, in part to allow them continued use of the AEW superstar.

Fans started to speculate that maybe AEW had been shrewdly attempting to create some type of industry-spanning alliance pitting the combined forces of several companies against the might of the industry-dominating WWE. And, while this may be partly the case, this past April we saw that even WWE itself was on Khan's list of other wrestling companies to partner with.

While not a full-scale promotional partnership as the others had been (fans can only hope and pray for such a mouth-watering development), the appearance by AEW's Chris Jericho on *Steve Austin's Broken Skull Sessions* on the WWE Network—billed as “opening the forbidden door”—made fans' heads explode. Sure, Jericho had a long history with WWE, but he was now a high-profile member of the competition.

Apparently, this was a deal initially worked out one-on-one between long-time friends Jericho and Austin. But, in the end, it had to be approved by both Khan and Vince McMahon. And it was.

It may have been a one-off, or it may lead to more collaboration. Anyone who doubts that should ask themselves: Could you ever have imagined a contracted AEW wrestler appearing on WWE television only a few months ago?

AAA, the NWA, NJPW, Impact, and even WWE. All doing business with AEW during the company's brief two-and-a-half years of existence. This amount of interpromotional cooperation on a major league level hasn't been seen since the days of the territories. And yet, AEW has clearly made it part of their mission.

Could this partly be due to a combination of vast financial resources, and the fact that the company is run by unabashed hardcore wrestling geeks dead set on making fans' fantasies come true? We've long been conditioned to believe that friendly business relations between pro wrestling companies was an impossibility, and most of us have just accepted this supposed reality. But maybe, just maybe, we're in the midst of getting pro wrestling's version of a “shared universe,” where interpromotional dream matches become real, and where different world champions can prove that they're not just the champions of one company, but something more.

To say it's a great time to be a wrestling fan is certainly a bit of a cliché, and I've been guilty of it myself at times. But, in some ways, it hasn't been this true in quite a long time. Perhaps the mainstream appeal of pro wrestling isn't exactly at an all-time high, but those fans who follow the sport religiously, who tune in every week to their favorite programs, are certainly being rewarded. □



# WIN, LOSE, or DRAW

BY HARRY BURKETT

**F**OR A HISTORY assignment during my senior year in high school, I had to research newspaper archives at the local university to find out what happened on the day of my birth: June 22, 1971. In those pre-internet days, I had to feed rolls of microfilm into a PC-looking reader (basically a box with a translucent screen) and advance the dial to find headlines from that particular date.

Richard Nixon was the U.S. president, and he met with Frank Fitzsimmons of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, two days after Jimmy Hoffa officially resigned his leadership position while serving time in prison. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were in a legal dispute with the U.S. government regarding publication of the top-secret “Pentagon Papers,” detailing misdeeds at the highest levels regarding the U.S.’ involvement in Vietnam. It was Kris Kristofferson’s 35th birthday.

These facts were unimportant to me. I knew Dory Funk Jr. was in his second year as NWA champion, Pedro Morales had just defeated Ivan Koloff for the WWWF title, and Verne Gagne was in either his eighth or tenth reign as AWA champion, depending on whom you ask.

I would later embark on my own research project and discover the wrestling world was still mourning the loss of Alberto Torres, who

had suffered internal injuries while teaming with “Cowboy” Bob Ellis against Ox Baker and The Claw in Verdigre, Nebraska, a death that Baker would notoriously chalk up to his dreaded heart punch. And WWWF ring announcer Vince McMahon had just promoted his very own card in Bangor, Maine.

None of this seemed like really old news when I was fumbling with microfilm and flipping through vintage wrestling magazines in the late-1980s. But now, while Dory Funk *could* make a comeback any day at age 80, and McMahon just promoted his 37th WrestleMania (I doubt there

were fireworks in Bangor), June 1971 seems like ancient history.

Yet June 22, 2021, is almost here, and I will reach my 50th birthday—and I’ll slip out of the coveted 18- to 49-year-old demographic. Actually, I feel like I dropped out of this demographic many years ago, aware my old-school preferences aren’t always best for business.

The difference between me and many younger fans is that I very much believe in the suspension of disbelief. I like credible in-ring action, sincere promos, and plausible storylines, and these parameters still leave plenty of room for colorful characters and dramatic storytelling. I think younger fans aren’t so hung up on being convinced they’re watching a real sport. Having grown up on sports entertainment, they accept everything: the athleticism, the comedy, and even over-the-top overacting from WWE superstars.

Some people thought Alexa Bliss with black ooze coming from her pores was the coolest part of WrestleMania 37. I wish she had simply competed for the Raw Women’s championship.

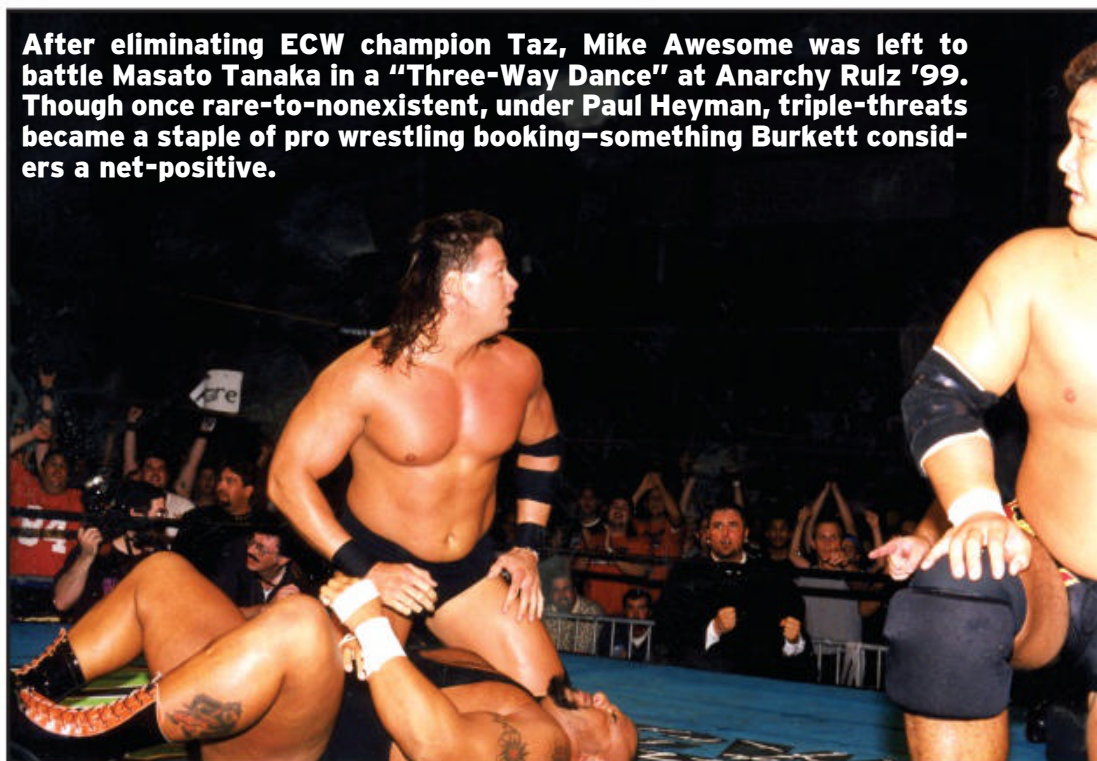


In May 1971, World heavyweight champion Dory Funk Jr. holds onto a headlock as Peter Maivia attempts a submission via backbreaker. About a month later, future *PWI* Senior Writer Harry Burkett was born.

PHOTO BY THEO EHRET



**After eliminating ECW champion Taz, Mike Awesome was left to battle Masato Tanaka in a "Three-Way Dance" at Anarchy Rulz '99. Though once rare-to-nonexistent, under Paul Heyman, triple-threats became a staple of pro wrestling booking—something Burkett considers a net-positive.**



I like to view wrestling through a sports lens, whereas others accept a much broader concept.

Professional wrestling was a very stable industry in 1971, ruled by the three kingpins of the NWA, AWA, and WWF. Promoters were competitive, in the sense they wanted this week's ticket sales to surpass last week's, but they weren't competitive with each other. The industry was stable; it just wasn't progressing.

We're in a breathtakingly better place now. I remember the early-1990s doldrums after the AWA had gone out of business and WCW was a weak competitor to a struggling WWF. I also remember the malaise after the WWF triumphed over WCW and ECW in 2001. Despite great efforts by WWE, TNA, and Ring of Honor, I consider the first 15 years of the 21st century a down period. Around 2015, online streaming and the "Women's Evolution" combined to make pro wrestling the vibrant and exciting industry it is today.

Back in 1971, promoters and most wrestlers simply thought of fans as marks—people to be fooled and separated from their hard-earned money. Most ads in wrestling magazines either touted how Joe Six-Pack could make a quick buck by repairing small engines in his garage after work, or how

skinny teenage guys could pack on pounds of muscle or use witchcraft to mesmerize young females.

Professional wrestling barely ranked above cockfighting in some circles. As a kid, I often had to defend my love of pro wrestling. And, sadly, I found myself defending the indefensible, how wrestling really wasn't as fake as everyone said. Soon, my friends and I would get into the percentages game. "Oh, the WWF is only 30-percent real, but the NWA is 80-percent real ..."

It's embarrassing when I think back on it. At least Vince McMahon's quest to loosen the clutches of state athletic commissions took wrestling out of those Dark Ages. The concept of sports entertainment was genius, allowing wrestling to be judged on its own merits.

The rules of play have changed a lot over the past 50 years, too. If tag team wrestling became popular way back in the 1930s, it's amazing that it occurred to no one that three-way or four-way matches made sense until Paul Heyman popularized ECW's "Three-Way Dance" in the mid-1990s. It took millennia for someone to rub two sticks together to make fire, I guess.

Respect for referees and overall rule enforcement have diminished considerably over the half-century. Remember when Flair

would shove Tommy Young, and Young would shove Flair back? I can't imagine George "The Animal" Steele even touching Jack Lotz or Dick Woehrl.

Then again, strict rule enforcement had its downside. Harley Race could dump Tommy Rich over the top rope and your main event was over. I remember when AWA champion Nick Bockwinkel did a swing throughout Minnesota, facing Greg Gagne in non-title main events. A few of those ended when Bockwinkel hit Gagne with a closed fist for the intentional DQ. Today, fans would clamor for their money back!

The 1970s and '80s were simpler times, ignorance was bliss, and I miss all the great stars of that era. Yet this industry has become a little bit stronger with each passing year since 1971. And even during the down cycle following the Attitude Era, WWE was strengthening itself as a company and global brand, creating developmental systems and experimenting with new business models (yes, the WWE Network) that helped lead to the boom period of today.

The corporatization of wrestling has cleaned up the industry. If you had a drug problem in the 1980s, was the WWF going to pay for your rehab? If you were sexually harassed, were you going to the HR department? Sadly, the obvious answer is no to both questions.

Since WWE became a publicly traded company in 1999, it's been necessary for its business practices to be transparent and above board. Corporate responsibility is now very important, and WWE and AEW lead the way in drug testing, diversity initiatives, and good public works.

Yes, I miss the wrestling of my formative years. But now, as my 50th birthday approaches, and the global COVID-19 pandemic recedes, I'll be thrilled to see this incredible industry emerge full throttle. I can't wait! □



# HOTSEAT

AN INCISIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE SPORT'S TOP STARS AND FIGURES

PHOTO COURTESY IMPACT WRESTLING



**M**AYBE THE DANCING girls who accompany Kenny Omega to the ring should put down those brooms and give him a hand carrying all that gold.

"The Cleaner" has amassed one of the most impressive championship collections in wrestling history, simultaneously holding the AEW World title, the AAA Mega title, and, most recently, the Impact World title—having beaten Rich Swann in April.

Figuratively speaking, the only thing that Omega may wear more than belts is hats. In addition to being the top titleholder in three different wrestling companies, Omega has many other duties as executive vice president of All Elite Wrestling, including helping produce matches and promos, leading the effort to launch AEW's first video game, and brokering the deals with other wrestling promoters that allowed him the opportunity to win all that gold.

With that much on his plate, you might think Omega's in-ring contributions would suffer. But you'd be wrong. In fact, following a somewhat unremarkable freshman year in AEW, Omega has looked like the "Best Bout Machine" of old as of late, thrilling audiences with astounding athleticism in recent title matches with Swann, Jon Moxley, and Rey Fenix.

But, as impressive as his signature V-Trigger and One-Winged Angel look, Omega would be the first to tell you that it's his knack for storytelling, and not necessarily his wrestling ability, that has put him in the conversation of all-time greats—as evidenced by his recent induction into the **Wrestling Observer Hall of Fame**.

And, with Don Callis, the Good Brothers, and the Young Bucks all by his side, Omega has weaved quite the tale lately, as he continues busting through "forbidden doors" and posing a potential threat to wrestling champions around the globe.

Days before his most recent championship victory at Impact's Rebellion pay-per-view, Omega spoke with **PWI** Senior Writer Al Castle about his quest for gold . . . and for greatness.





**A natural athlete, Kenny Omega boasts an offensive arsenal of strikes, slams, and aerial attacks, all executed with unbelievable precision. But he feels it's his ability to tell stories—new and different ones—that makes him one of the best.**

**Castle:** The last time I spoke with you was about four years ago for a “Hotseat” interview. I remember it was the middle of the night because you were in Japan. And what I remember about that was you bringing up the *PWI* “500” for that year. I don’t think we even had you in the top 10. I remember being kind of taken aback, like, *Wow, this really means something to this guy. It’s really important.* Now, all these years later, you’ve been number one in the “500.” Looking back, why did stuff like that matter to you as much as it did?

**Omega:** I feel as long as I’m proud of my own work, if my peers are proud of my work, if they accept me, if they enjoy the work that I do, if it’s benefiting my company, if it’s appeasing the fan base, if it’s making people happy around me, then things like rankings and Halls of Fame and all of those peripheral sort of accomplishments that you can receive in wrestling, those are really secondary to that.

However, I feel like if you can accomplish enough in professional wrestling to be recognized

by media outlets, or websites or magazines, where they will name you as a top-10 athlete, top-five athlete, top-one athlete, then it’s something to hang your hat on and something to be proud of—especially with wrestling, where it’s really subjective, it’s really opinion-based. It’s hard to really judge and select who is number one. What do you base it on? Do you base it on match performance? Do you base it on the accolades of the year? Popularity? To be selected as number one for that year [2018], I hit enough of those—whatever the criteria was—to be selected by people that are experts within the industry.

So, I think it’s really cool. Again, for me anyway, it’s all about what I can give back as an athlete, as an artist, as a professional wrestler. And, if I’m making my fanbase happy, if I’m making the fans that watch my product happy, that’s first and foremost. But, if there are people that study this, that analyze this, and are watching everything across the board, and they think that I’m the number one guy doing it, then that’s a fantastic accomplishment.

**Castle:** I know everybody who goes into wrestling does—or at least should—aspire to be in the main event, aspire to be a world champion, to be at top of the business. But it’s something else when you start to get into that “all-time great” discussion. Was there a point for you where you took it to that level—where it’s not just about being the top guy in my company, but now setting a legacy as an all-time great?

**Omega:** I was never really laser-focused on something





After remaining at arm's length of the main event for most of 2020, "The Cleaner" began to make his way through AEW's singles ranks last fall.

like that, because I knew that my strong suit within professional wrestling wasn't the actual wrestling itself. I pride myself in my ability to perform, and I consider myself as someone whose performances will hopefully be unmatched on any card that I'm on. That's what I strive for. I found that as my career progressed, and I started to reach the 15, 16, 17, 20-year mark in my career, one of my greatest assets as a performer wasn't the fact that I had an incredible athletic base to kind of create a foundation for my professional wrestling. My greatest asset was my brain, my mind—and the drive and the will to create stories that could possibly reach people outside of what a normal wrestling fan was used to seeing.

And, again, with professional wrestling being what it is—part sports, part fight, part acting—it's hard to find criteria for what makes the best wrestlers of all-time. I think everyone's Mount Rushmore is going to be a little

different. For me, I just wanted to stand out in what made me special. And I was lucky. I had a tremendous sports background, and I was blessed to be born gifted with the ability to perform well in almost any sport that I tried. And that really helped for my wrestling backbone. It really helped in the ring for me to not have to worry so much about that.

So, I focused on the mental and emotional aspect of it. How do you tell human stories? How do you tell stories that make you think? How do you tell stories that make you feel? And not just the stories where I'm going to reference a match back from the '80s or '90s, and just carbon copy that and tell it in 2020. I mean types of stories that you don't even see, or I'd never seen. That was what my goal was. And I really do think that regardless of how great a match was, how great the moves were, the sequences, false finishes, whatever, if you take away that story layer and the type of

emotion that I tried to convey, then I wouldn't be in any discussion at all.

**Castle:** Given that you reached those heights three or four years ago, particularly in New Japan with your run with Okada and as IWGP champion, one of the narratives in AEW, certainly in your first year, was, "Where is the Kenny Omega of old?" Were you getting frustrated, in that first year, that you couldn't match the heights that you hit in the years before that?

**Omega:** No, it was never frustrating for me. I never took that personally. It did frustrate me that the fans—particularly fans that watch North American professional wrestling—it really caught me off guard, at first, how ignorant the fanbase can be here. I never received any sort of backlash or heavy criticism like that in Japan. But everyone here likes to have their favorites, and everything else is beneath them. It's very odd. But I really don't try to pay attention. It's just perplexing





**Omega attempts a submission on NJPW rival Kazuchika Okada at Dominion 2018, where he'd finally capture the IWGP heavyweight title. The bout earned an unprecedented seven-star rating in the *Wrestling Observer* and was voted Match of the Year by *PWI* readers.**

for me. I don't understand why people choose to take such ownership, and why they have such pride towards one thing, and everything else, aside from the one thing that they've supported, is just *de facto* garbage. It's strange, but I'm used to that American wrestling culture.

My whole purpose in year one of AEW was to help create this new influx of talent that people probably hadn't seen before, or people that hadn't quite reached their potential. And also, it was a bit of a learning process for me, too. I didn't want to be front row center learning this whole new live TV thing. I wanted to kind of dip my toes into it a bit and get used to what it was like to wrestle in that style. It's much different than what I was doing in Japan. We had, of course, television in New Japan. But we didn't have to do it live. And we didn't have commercial breaks that were set in stone for certain times within the episode.

So, for me to have to learn that on the fly, that was something that I wanted to take some time

to learn, because I really did want to lead by example with my performances in the company. I wanted to be a leader within the company, because, for a lot of us, this was a brand-new experience. We didn't have years and years and years of television experience, like Jon Moxley or

Chris Jericho or Christian. So, I was completely fine with letting them take the reins at the beginning. I thought Jericho did a fantastic job as champion. He was a great representative for the company. It was fantastic to see Mox come into his own and be what he always wanted to be.

People say, "Where's the Kenny Omega that had 45-minute classics?" Well, for one, I'm never going to get 45 minutes here. This is a completely different country, completely different Western culture, completely different style. But for people to say, "Where did he go?" Was I carried? Was I washed up? Where am I washed up? As months go by, as years go by, I'm breaking down. That's just how it is. Physically, I'm not the man that I used to be four or five years ago. I have to use my brain a lot more than I used to. I'm dealing with a laundry list of injuries, but I'm never going to use that as an excuse. And, if you need a five-star match, well, I can give you one anytime that you want. I've already proven it.



**Kota Ibushi and The Young Bucks celebrate their friend's IWGP championship win, which was a primary factor in Omega ranking #1 in the 2018 *PWI* "500."**





In the final moments of their historic Champion vs. Champion match at Impact's Rebellion PPV, Omega prepares to deliver another V-Trigger knee strike to Rich Swann.

People think I don't even deserve to be in the conversation of best of all-time, because I haven't met my old standard of having the greatest matches of all-time. Well, how many times do you have to have the greatest match of all-time? It's sort of like, "What have you done for me lately?" You want me to have a greatest match of all-time? Well, we already have had the two greatest tag matches.

And, like I said before, I kind of want to be the Swiss Army Knife of professional wrestling. I don't want to be the greatest wrestler at one type of match. I want to be someone who you could throw into any scenario and get exactly what you're looking for out of that performance. I want to be that person for AEW, and I want to be that person for the industry itself. So, if it's [time] for me to take a little bit of a backseat to someone else, I want to take the best backseat that I can possibly take. When it's time for me to step up and bring it, I'll be the guy to step up to bring it.

**Castle:** I imagine that a part of the change in your role is due to

the fact that you're not just a talent in AEW. You're an executive vice president. So, your role is different than it would be in other companies, where, first and foremost, you're thinking about your own career. How much of that do you have to set aside in AEW?

**Omega:** That's the part that people don't see. I think if they knew everything that was going on behind the scenes, it would lift the veil a little too much. But yeah, I'm there at the arenas really, really early. I'm there at the arenas really late. I'm always on the phones. I'm agenting matches. I'm putting stuff together. I'm agenting pre-tapes, I'm planning other matches, aside from my own. I'm the creative head of our video game. My schedule is very wonky right now.

I have other side projects I'm involved in. The supplement line. I have a lot of events in video games that I'm hosting. There's stuff that I'm always doing aside from the wrestling. It's not me showing up with my rolly bag and putting together a match, just having to worry about that

one performance. It's so much more than that. And people don't have to know about that. But it's a very full plate and very mentally exhausting. And, for me, I find it just a miracle that I'm able to pull it off every week. And then, of course, there's the opportunity to try to open up the rest of the world a little bit by working with other companies. I'm one of the dudes that is right in the mix with all of those angles. And thus, that's even more work there.

**Castle:** You just touched on it: So much has been made about "opening the forbidden door." You're challenging for the Impact World title this weekend. You've already picked up the title in AAA. We've seen relationships with the NWA, with New Japan. What's your vision for how far this can go? Do you envision a world where all these doors are open?

**Omega:** I think there will always be limits. There will always be, maybe, lines that you cannot cross. But I believe that there is a world—at the right place, at the right time—where you could see every company





**Sure, March's Exploding Barbed Wire Death Match had an anticlimactic ending, but Omega and Moxley still put on an entertaining match rooted in solid ring psychology. Love him or hate him, the Winnipeg native is a total pro between the ropes, never content to rest on his laurels.**

working together. And I don't necessarily mean every company. I just mean if a company wanted to work with another company, I think they would be open to the idea. And I think, again—this is a terrible thing to say—but one of the reasons why the “forbidden door” was opened with New Japan was partly due to what we're all struggling with right now, which is a pandemic.

It forced us to take a step back and stop worrying about our own stuff and see what kind of world we're all living in, and how we need to set aside petty differences. We need to set aside just age-old tropes of, “This is my company and my territory, and stay the heck out.” There was no way we could ever play nice or cross paths. I think it's great that now people are realizing we're all struggling in the same way. We're all facing the same hardships. This is the same planet, and a lot of us are sharing the same fans. Why not make the world a bit of a better place, as best as we can for what we do?

We're not as important as a lot of us think that we are. But, if we can contribute in some kind of

positive way with what we do and what we're good at, I think we need to take the motion to do it.

**Castle:** Are you anxious to get back to wrestling in front of fans, beyond what you've been doing in Jacksonville over the last year?

**Omega:** Yeah. This experience in front of no fans and empty arenas—or in front of wrestlers recreating sort of a very intimate fan base—it's been unique. And I'm all for learning new things, and increasing my skill set the best that I can, or just having experiences. It was interesting, and I learned a lot by having to perform in front of nobody. And I've learned that it's not the same thing.

You can't perform the same way that you do in front of no people that you would in front of a crowd. They're very different animals. So, if you go into a match, which may be great in front of a live audience ... you and your opponent have to double down



**Omega lands a hard kick on Tomohiro Ishii in his second defense of the IWGP heavyweight title—a hard-hitting bout that exceeded 30 minutes. On weekly AEW TV, he's adapted to a slightly more condensed style, with shorter time limits and predefined commercial breaks.**





**Kenny Omega poses with fellow EVP, Cody Rhodes, and Chief Brand Officer, Brandi Rhodes, at an All Elite Wrestling press conference in 2019. Between his executive duties, producing matches, and actually performing, Omega's weekly schedule is usually very full.**

on the energy that you put forward, because that's all they can see. That's all they can hear. It's a lot more tiring of an experience to have to not only do your match, act, react, but also give that extra energy that otherwise may not be there because you don't have four or five or 10-thousand fans reacting and screaming and giving that extra stimuli.

It's a completely different skill. I'm glad I learned it. Is it going to be something that will be necessary later on down the road? Maybe not, but you never know. You really don't.

**Castle:** Obviously, your character had a big storyline arc over the last few months. Has it been tough flying blind and not getting that reaction from fans? Not really being sure, "Is this working or not?"

**Omega:** Yeah, it's very difficult. It's tough to know when something's actually hit home, or if something was a homerun or not. It's even difficult to judge by numbers. You can't look at ratings and say, "Okay, this was a hit," because they're not going to

fluctuate that much. And not only that, but you know, the ratings that that we monitor, it's just one type of rating and in one country.

I'm thinking way more outside the box than that. I would love

for us to be more of an international, worldwide, recognized brand. I want what I do to be appreciated not just in America. I care about how people in Canada look at it, how people in the U.K. look at it, how people in Japan look at it, Mexico. I feel like I'm proud of my recent work, and I'm just doing the best that I can. But it's so hard based on the little that we know from the current world state.

**Castle:** You touched on ratings. I think it probably means more to folks like us on this side of the business than you guys—the "Wednesday Night Wars," as they were known. Now, with *NXT* moving to Tuesday night, is that something that is a point of pride for you and rest of AEW? Is it something you celebrate? Or is it just the removal of a distraction?



**The AEW World champion defeats Matt Sydal with the One-Winged Angel on the March 24 episode of *Dynamite*. To date, only one wrestler has kicked out of this devastating finishing maneuver: former IWGP World heavyweight champ Kota Ibushi.**





**Omega clutches the AAA Mega championship belt after a successful defense against Jack Evans on AEW Dark. As he travels about collecting and defending titles, Omega wants to grow awareness of AEW in countries like Mexico, Japan, and his native Canada.**

**Omega:** This is my true, honest feeling: I never felt one way or another towards the “war,” if you could call it that. I wouldn’t call it that. I knew that we would tell different stories in our company. I knew that we would show different types of matches in our company. I can only control what I have been handed. And I’m sure the Bucks feel the same way. But, for *NXT* to have moved to Tuesday, I mean, sure, great. I never felt like it was a battle for Wednesday. I feel like it’s a battle across the board, where there’s so much wrestling every day during the week.

I try to think back to when I was a fan. And I thought I was, like, a mega-fan. And even still, I think at the

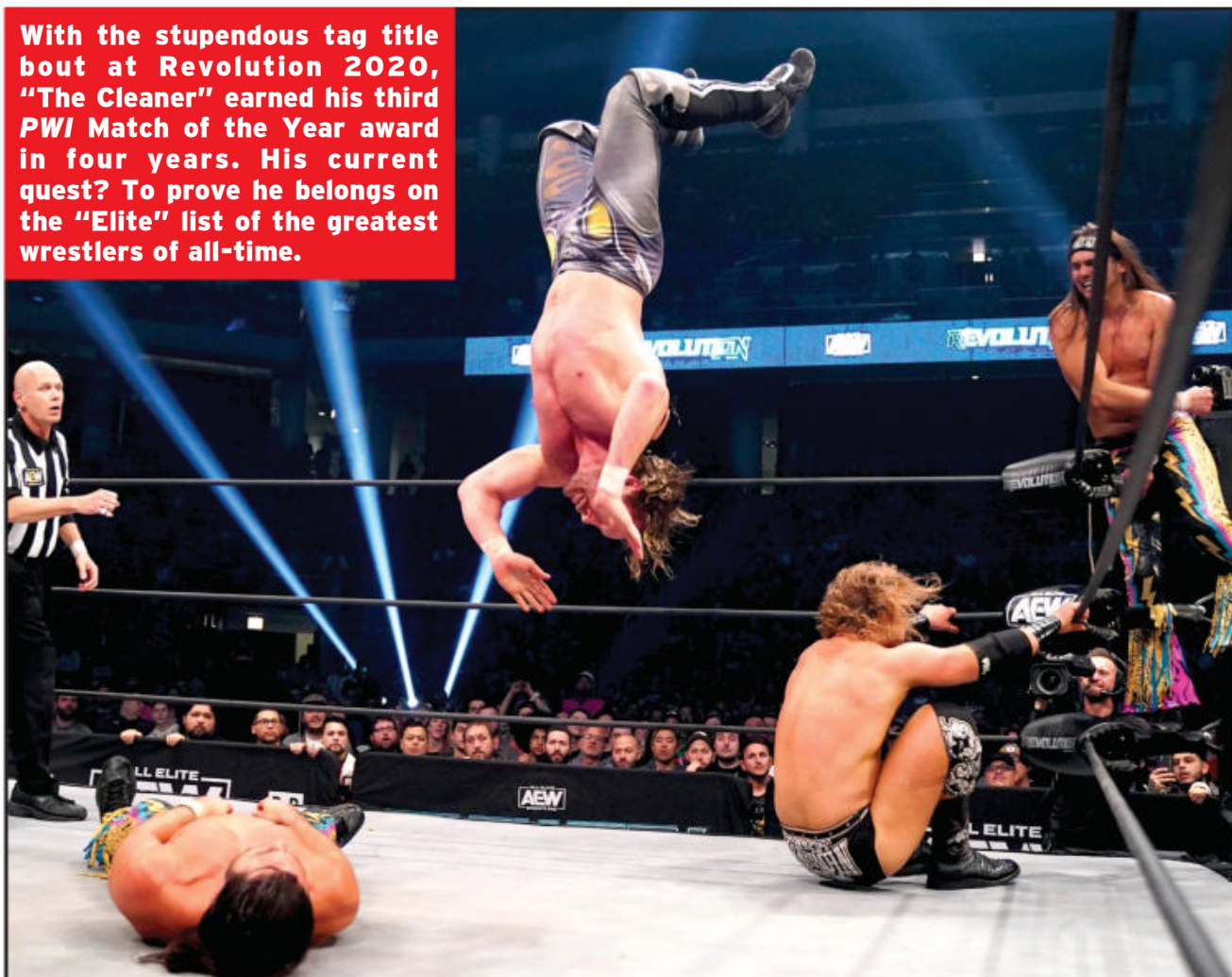
height of my fandom, I couldn’t watch the amount of wrestling that is available to us today. So, for me, the real war is how do you get the eyeballs for your day of

the week? We’re not battling for Wednesday. I feel like I’m battling for the week.

There are so many great wrestlers doing it. And there’s no one roster on the planet that has all of the greatest athletes and talent. That doesn’t exist. There’s always going to be one or two guys somewhere else that could fit in and put in great work anywhere. So, it’s just how do you be different enough? I love a lot of those *NXT* guys. A lot of them are my friends. I love to see them doing well. I love it when I hear that they had a great match or a great performance.

I’m not trying to steal viewers that are watching another product. I want brand-new viewers that watch what we do and say *hey, this was pretty fun*, or funny, or dramatic, or whatever. And they tell a friend. And then, *they* tell a friend. And now, we have these new viewers. I just want for those fans to enjoy our products, because they really are the backbone of all of wrestling right now. They’ve kept all of us afloat. □

**With the stupendous tag title bout at Revolution 2020, “The Cleaner” earned his third PWI Match of the Year award in four years. His current quest? To prove he belongs on the “Elite” list of the greatest wrestlers of all-time.**





# LESS SHOWS, MORE ACTION

A STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF WRESTLING IN THE TIME OF COVID

TEXT BY KRISTEN ASHLY

DATA SOURCED FROM  
CAGEMATCH.NET &  
PROFIGHTDB.COM

When we compiled our August 2020 edition—the first *PWI* issue to include the term "COVID-19"—we had precious little idea what wrestling might look like today. Now, as the industry inches closer to "normal," a look at the numbers offers a few pleasant surprises.

**C** OVID-19 CHANGED THE lives of every person on this planet, undoubtedly. The stress that the pandemic placed on all of us could only be countered by self-care and by focusing on what we love, like professional wrestling. Though wrestling also took a hit, the industry thrived in a number of ways that comforted fans when they needed it the most.

The COVID-19 pandemic arrived so swiftly and suddenly—literally in a matter of weeks—leaving us unprepared for the chaos it would create. Everyone on the globe has felt the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in some way, as the virus left no country completely unscathed.

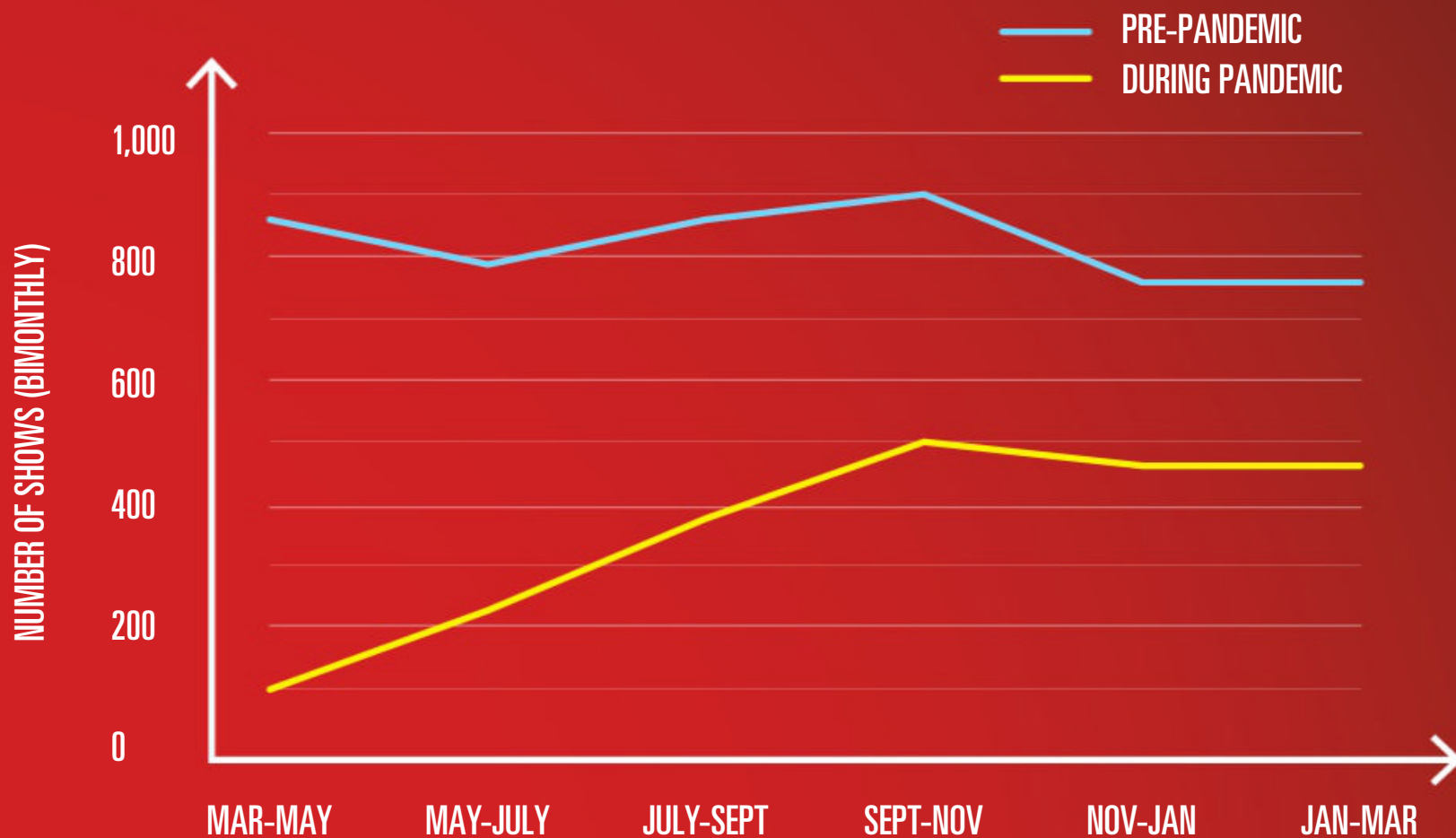
PHOTO BY MIKEY NOLAN



**Elayna Black (Cora Jade) enters the ring through a crowd of masked, socially distanced fans at a Game Changer Wrestling event in Silverado, California.**



## WRESTLING SHOWS, MARCH TO JANUARY (2019-20, 2020-21)



BIMONTHLY PERIODS BEGINNING IN MARCH

Nearly immediately, global air travel was restricted; travel bans were put in place; governors placed state-wide stay-at-home orders; mask and social distancing orders were put into place; the economy crashed; essential businesses were required to change how they operated; and businesses not deemed essential were shut down.

Like all industries, wrestling was not immune from the consequences of the pandemic. Promotions had to halt shows due to public health ordinances or lack of a venue. Eventually, some smaller companies without sufficient backing had to shut their doors. In the early stages of the pandemic, the shows that did manage to run lacked an audience, and most companies were forced to think outside the box to bring a wrestling experience to the fans.

Wrestlers were not able to travel internationally, or sometimes even between states, to make the few

shows being put on. Many performers had previously relied on international shows (or the many independent shows that took place each year) to be able to stay in the game, and now were unable to compete at all.

For the events that did run, the number of matches, length of matches, number of workers utilized, and even the types

**The Motor City Machine Guns defeated The North for the Impact World tag team championship at an empty-arena *Impact Wrestling* taping. Though a live crowd would have enhanced it, MCMG's "homecoming" still stands out as a feel-good memory from last summer.**



PHOTO BY BASIL MAHMUD/IMPACT WRESTLING





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**Bayley attempts a hurricanrana on friend-turned-rival Sasha Banks in front of virtual fans in WWE's ThunderDome—an adaptation that offered a new experience for fans while adding some much-needed pizzazz to WWE TV.**

of matches held had to change in order to fit within CDC guidelines. In some cases, this required promotions with contracted rosters to change how they hired and released talent.

By documenting comparative differences during the pandemic with stats and data, we can learn from a situation that required a complete top-to-bottom makeover of the wrestling business in an unbelievably quick fashion.

Though every country has suffered the fallout of the pandemic, this piece will attempt to document those changes by using data strictly from the U.S., to keep to the direct experience of the author. Data from U.S. promotions, shows, wrestlers, and titles are used, except when stated otherwise.

The dates used for pre-COVID analysis range from March 12, 2019, to March 10, 2020. The data for post-COVID analysis is from March 11, 2020, to March 10, 2021 (accounting for the 2020 leap year). Data and statistics are measured and compared in several categories, all pertinent to the outcomes COVID produced, and outlined further in this piece.

## FEWER ACTIVE PROMOTIONS DUE TO COVID— BUT NOT AS FEW AS YOU MIGHT THINK

Most American promotions had to halt business due to the pandemic, but, fortunately, not all of them had to close their doors permanently. During the first year of COVID, 700 promotions were listed as active in the U.S. In the year prior, 714 promotions were listed as active. **Though wrestling as a whole was affected during the first year of COVID, only a net 14 promotions went defunct.** It's important to note, too, that not every promotion closed due to COVID restrictions; some promotions (in the U.S. and abroad) closed after allegations surfaced during the #SpeakingOut movement. Nevertheless, the small change in active promotions is a promising note for the U.S. wrestling market.

## 53% DECREASE IN TOTAL EVENTS HELD

A clear benchmark of how well the wrestling industry is doing is the number of cards that are presented each year. For this figure, TV shows, house shows, live independent events, and pay-per-views were all counted. In the U.S., **4,946 shows were held in the year prior to COVID. During the first year of COVID, only 2,301 shows were held**, showing a loss of 2,645 shows from the previous year. That means we saw only

46.5% of the shows held during the previous year. A drop that significant was felt throughout the industry. And, though the number is staggering, it's also not incredibly surprising.

**In February 2020, Kevin Kross (Karrion Kross) clobbers "Filthy" Tom Lawlor at the old ECW Arena in Philadelphia. Not long after, Major League Wrestling opted to halt future tapings, before finally returning in a safer, empty-arena environment last fall.**



PHOTO BY GEORGE NAPOLITANO

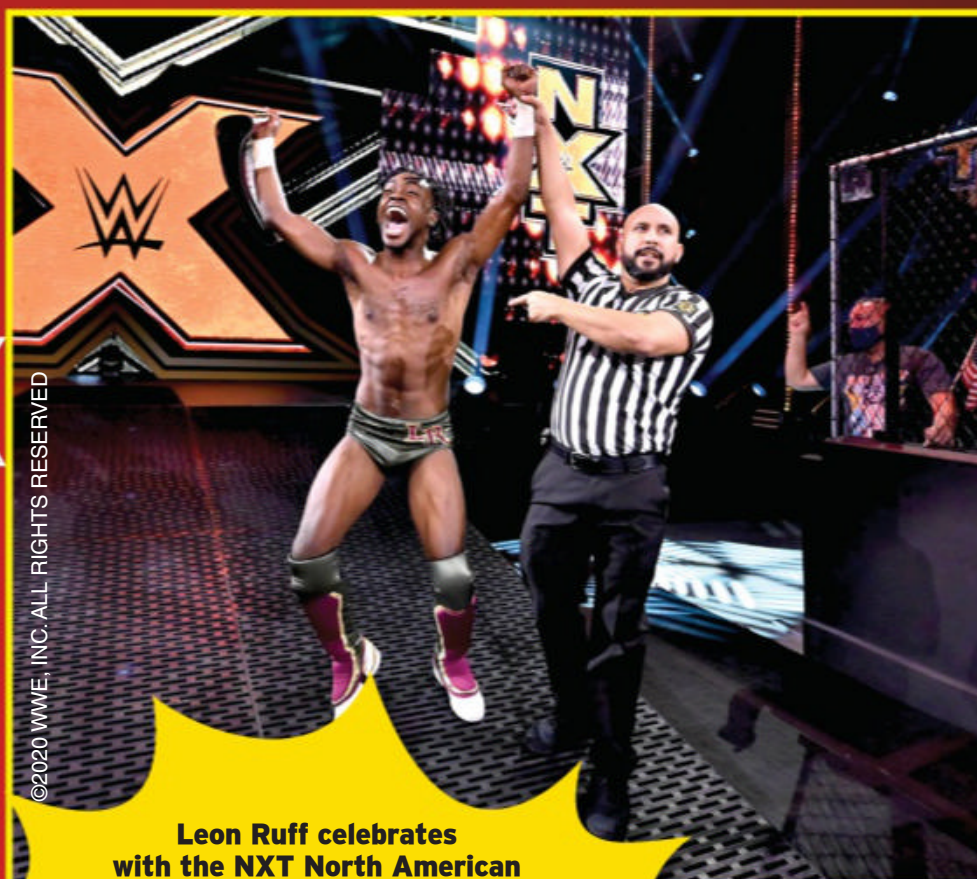


To take it one step further, for the two months prior to statewide lockdowns and travel bans, 727 shows took place in the U.S. In the following two months—the first two months of the pandemic—only 158 shows were held. Significant drops close to the start of the pandemic are a trend throughout the data.

### THE PANDEMIC MEANT MORE STREAMING AND TELEVISED WRESTLING

As stated earlier, the “Total Events Held” figure includes shows streamed online or aired on television, regardless of the number of fans in attendance. Many promotions had to reconfigure the way they presented a wrestling experience to fans. And, with official restrictions on audience sizes in place, companies really had to get creative.

**Prior to COVID, 1,060 shows were digitally streamed or aired. During the first year of COVID, 1,331 shows were broadcast, for an increase of 271 shows.** It might seem like a small number, but that’s an increase of over 25%. It also reflects the growing number of independent promotions that, previously reliant almost entirely on ticket sales, were able to adapt in order to stay financially viable.



Leon Ruff celebrates with the NXT North American strap after upsetting Johnny Gargano last November. While overall matches and title changes were down last year, title changes actually happened in a higher percentage of bouts, which made for some entertaining TV.

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Photo: Mike González





Without ticket sales to rely on, popular indie promotions like Beyond Wrestling had to get creative with streaming events, like this PWI-sponsored Iron Match between Trish Adora and Tony Deppen on Valentine's Day 2021.

PHOTO BY JAYLEE/PHOTOGRAPHY

Also of note: There was a slight decrease in the average number of workers booked in each match. **Prior to COVID, 65.8% of total matches were singles bouts.**

**That percentage increased to 69.2% during COVID.** Though a small change in percentage, social distancing restrictions are likely to blame.

Evidence can be found in the fact that matches with more than two workers dropped significantly. **Pre-pandemic, matches with more than two workers**

**numbered 11,544. During the pandemic, that number fell to 3,931.** For tag team wrestlers, stables, or singles wrestlers used to working in larger configurations, fewer opportunities to work existed.

But, to the delight of fans, singles rivalries have flourished in myriad promotions, including WWE, AEW, and Impact Wrestling.

### ACTIVE WRESTLERS DECREASED— AT HOME MORE THAN ABROAD

Also important to measure: the number of competitors still listed as active. Though not every wrestler listed as active even stepped foot in a ring during COVID, measuring how many left the business is a good indicator of how hard the virus hit home for many wrestlers.

**Prior to COVID, 6,592 U.S. wrestlers were listed as active. During COVID, that number decreased to 6,549 active wrestlers.** During COVID, a net total of 43 U.S. wrestlers left the industry—to be sure, for myriad reasons. The same measurement was taken for international wrestlers. Internationally, only 10 wrestlers left the business during the first year of COVID, bringing the number of international wrestlers to 8,165—suggesting American wrestlers, with fewer options at home and abroad, needed to find other ways to make ends meet.

### THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON CHAMPIONSHIP REIGNS

With fewer shows and matches, title reigns and number of title defenses were also notably affected. **Pre-COVID, a total of 7,843 title matches were held, resulting in 2,106 title changes. During the following year under COVID, that number dropped significantly to 2,539 title matches, resulting in 746 title changes.**

### ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL

For the wrestling shows that still carried on, many promoters saw a decrease in the number of matches they booked, in order to keep personnel and the risk of infection to a minimum.

How many matches were lost to the first year of COVID? **The total number of matches dropped from 33,725 matches to 12,746 matches during the first year of the pandemic.** A whopping 20,979 matches! To put it mildly, this was a serious blow to wrestlers and promoters, with just over 1/3 of the matches presented as compared to the previous year.

Sadie Gibbs works over the arm of Nyla Rose at All Out 2019. Unable to travel during the pandemic, the talented British grappler was released from her AEW contract last August.



PHOTO BY LEE/SOUTH/AEW



## FINAL THOUGHTS, OR: WHY WE SHOULD BE HOPEFUL FOR THE FUTURE

Most data during the first year of COVID is staggering, but not always clear enough to produce conclusions. In some instances, wrestlers, promotions, shows, attendance, and matches changed due to reasons outside of the pandemic, or at least not directly correlated.

All promotions had to change their modes of operation. AEW, WWE, Impact, MLW, and Ring of Honor all made changes to their show format in response to the pandemic, and it's safe to say nearly all indie promotions had to do the same. And yet, quite a few promotions saw growth, and, in some cases, increased their roster size.

With time, wrestling is making a slow return to what many now refer to as a "new normal." At press time, there are still safety protocols in place, and there are still travel bans preventing a full return to a rich U.S. wrestling scene.

But there's also hope. Live shows with seats available are returning. The digital age has allowed fans to watch wrestling in a completely new way that, at times, provides uniquely enjoyable experiences—from cinematic matches and single-night tournaments to marathon taping sessions that allow for more cohesive storylines.

While the first year of COVID proved to be full of historic moments, both good and bad, wrestling appears to have adapted and grown. As fans, we're forever grateful for that. ■



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW

**KiLynn King lands a cutter on Christi Jaynes. With indie bookings few and far between, supersized AEW Dark tapings gave valuable exposure (and income) to wrestlers struggling to get by.**

Does this mean that title reigns were longer due to a shallower talent pool? Not necessarily; **the percentage of title matches that resulted in title changes actually increased from 26.9% to 29.4% during COVID.** This doesn't necessarily mean that more people held titles, but it's an interesting measurement.

Perhaps promoters booked a higher rate of title changes to keep things entertaining, in order to boost fan morale. At times, it certainly felt that way. And, despite the predictions of some pundits, there was no shortage of exciting, memorable moments during the first 12 months of the pandemic.

**After an empty-arena event last year, WrestleMania 37 felt a lot closer to normal, with a sizable, if still somewhat restricted crowd soaking in the festivities.**



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# 16 YEARS TO THE MOUNTAIN TOP

LASHLEY DARES **ANYONE**  
TO TRY AND KNOCK  
HIM DOWN!

TEXT BY RIGHTEOUS REG



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From the beginning, Bobby Lashley seemed to have all the makings of a great champion. Now that's he firmly established himself as a main-event level star, he's determined to stay right where he is ...

# B

OBBY LASHLEY IS the third Black WWE champion, holding the same championship worn first by The Rock, and then Kofi Kingston. He worked 16 years to get to this moment. And the "Chief Hurt Officer" of The Hurt Business says it will be this way for a

long time, because there is no one in the WWE locker room who can outwork him.

"It feels incredible. I think it's just a huge achievement to win that title," Lashley told *PWI*. "There's not very many people across the board who have won



Bobby Lashley cinches in his Hurlock, which would ultimately prove too much for challenger Drew McIntyre—ensuring "The All Mighty" retained his WWE championship in the opening match of WrestleMania 37.





that title, so, to get my name etched next to some of the greatest in the history of this sport is a dream come true. It shows the hard work.”

If you know anything about the background of Bobby Lashley, you know that this statement holds true. Beginning his career with the WWE, Lashley seemed destined to be in the position that he’s in. When you’re 6’3”, 260 pounds, and look like a video game character or action figure—one with the work ethic of Lashley—a WWE championship run feels almost inevitable. It’s only surprising it’s taken this long.

On the March 3, 2021, edition of *Monday Night Raw*, Bobby Lashley defeated The Miz to become WWE World champion. And the 16 years of struggle, hard work, persistence, and all-out will were all worth it ... all for this one moment.

Up to that point, “The All Mighty” had experienced his share of highs and lows—two reigns as champion of the rebooted ECW brand; taking part in one of the lowest rated pay-per-views of all time (December to Dismember); competing in one of the featured matches of the highly successful *WrestleMania 23* (“The Battle Of The Billionaires”); being released from WWE in 2008; starting an MMA career, where he boasts an impressive record of 15-2-0; winning the TNA/Impact

World championship four times; and wrestling in promotions all over the world before finally returning to WWE in 2018.

All of these challenges ultimately brought Lashley to the top of the mountain. “I think it’s just finding yourself,” he reflected. “In this business, there are all kinds of different roles and characters you go through until they find where you’re at. The biggest thing is timing. There was never a time where I said to myself, *Oh, it’s going to be right now*. I mean, all the way through my career, if you’re looking for someone that fits the mold of being the champion and what they can accomplish, if you just took the gloves off and just let people go, I think I had that from the beginning.”

Bobby Lashley tapped into that when he teamed up with the leader of The Hurt Business, MVP. The faction quickly became one of the most dominant forces on *Raw*, with Lashley, MVP, Shelton Benjamin, and Cedric Alexander running wild over the entire roster—putting the wheels in motion for Lashley’s eventual main-event run.

With Lashley and MVP leading by example, Alexander and Benjamin started to take on different roles and look the part—custom suits, brimming with confidence—when they joined the group. As part of The Hurt Business, Alexander and Benjamin quickly cap-





PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/IMPACT WRESTLING

**At Impact Wrestling, Bobby Lashley realized his potential as a confident, dominant world champion. It should come as little surprise that he was able to do it again in WWE.**

tured the Raw tag team championship and had some tremendous encounters with The New Day.

It seemed at one point that The Hurt Business was unstoppable, and it would take an army to split them up. That would hold true only for so long. Soon after Lashley won the WWE championship in the weeks leading up to WrestleMania, Lashley and MVP became fed up with the way Alexander and Benjamin were working—specifically, with their failed attempt at taking Drew McIntyre out of the WWE championship match at WrestleMania. Alexander and Benjamin were promptly removed from The Hurt Business.

“You know, sometimes the business is exactly that: a business. And you never know where business will go,” said Lashley. “One day, you’re fighting against each other, and, the next day, you can be shaking hands with the devil again. We don’t have any feelings involved in what we are doing right now. I leave my feelings at home with my kids. When I come to work, it’s all business.”

As of this writing, business between Bobby Lashley and MVP is stronger than ever. Throughout his second stint in WWE, Lashley has been a little angrier and a little more aggressive—and MVP was the inspiration.

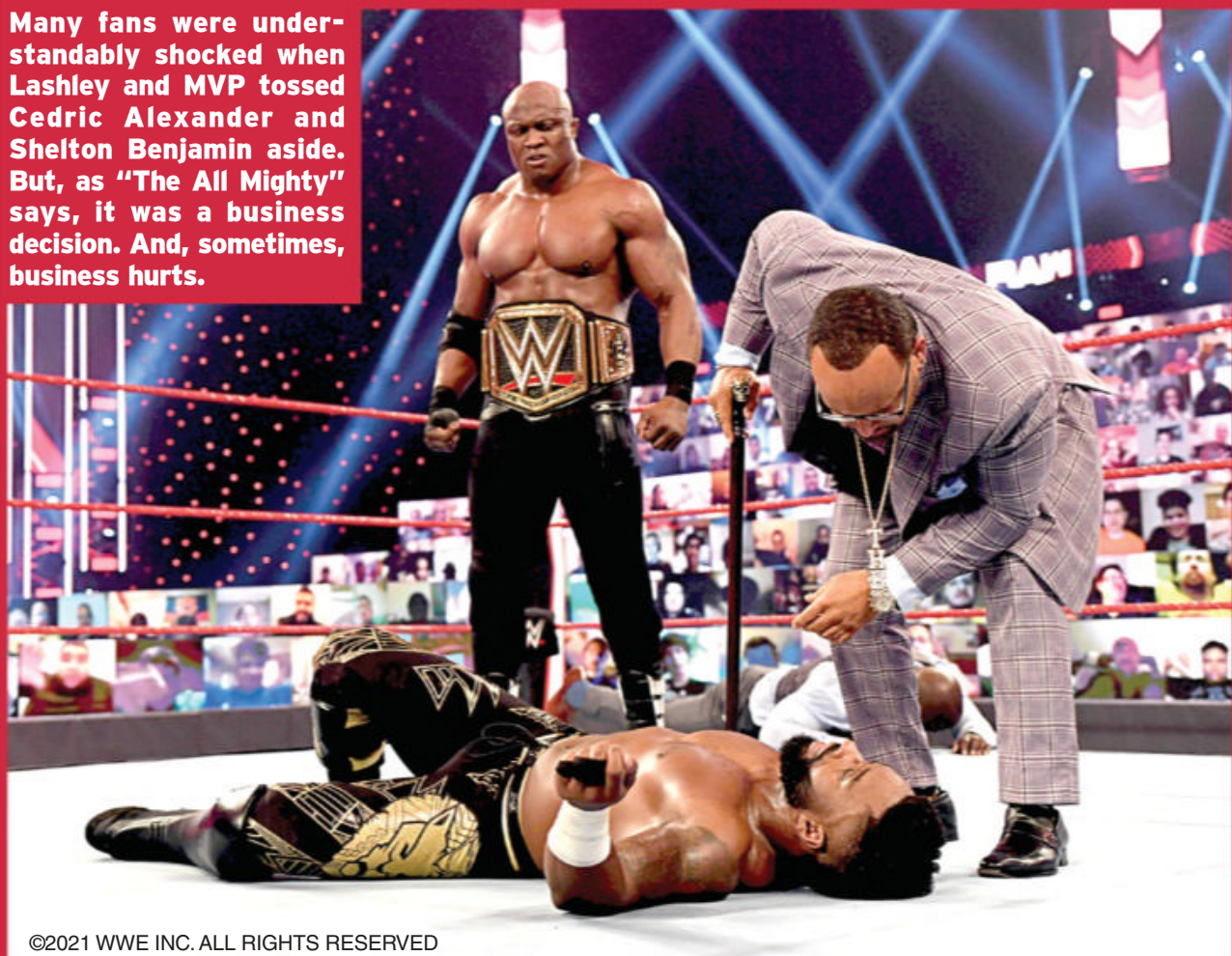
The two had previously paired up to get Lashley a world title in Impact Wrestling, and MVP was right there at his side as he became the WWE champion. “MVP is always going to be a friend of mine,” Lashley said. “We’ve always wanted to do something together, and, previously, it was more him than me.”

Following MVP’s appearance in the 2020 Royal Rumble, the voice of The Hurt Business was about ready to retire. But plans quickly changed. “He was actually just going to return for one match for his son, but the pairing of us two just worked so well together,” Lashley revealed. “There are times when you’re out there and you’re going, and then there’s a time when you’re out there and you’re actually feeling it and having fun. And that’s where we are at right now.”

Lashley continued: “[MVP] made me believe and understand where I should be. I told him he needs to be back, and he said, if he does, I need to get my butt in gear and get that title like I’m supposed to.”

And so he did. Lashley and MVP are all about business. And it was all business when Lashley stepped into WrestleMania 37 as the WWE champion to face off, once again, against Drew McIntyre, whom he’d challenged for the WWE title last June. On April 10, 2021, “The All Mighty” made history as the first Black man to walk into WrestleMania and walk *out* of WrestleMania as the WWE champion.

**Many fans were understandably shocked when Lashley and MVP tossed Cedric Alexander and Shelton Benjamin aside. But, as “The All Mighty” says, it was a business decision. And, sometimes, business hurts.**



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PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/IMPACT WRESTLING

**Lashley and McIntyre have a history, dating back to the mid-2010s in Impact [above], which made their WrestleMania battle all the more special. In his conversation with PWI's Righteous Reg, Lashley expressed a great deal of respect for his longtime rival.**



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Going from the screens and lights of the ThunderDome to the roar of a rowdy, restless, and wet crowd of 25,000 was a bit of an adjustment for Lashley. “The crowd at ‘Mania was magical. It’s almost like, I don’t want to say that we forgot what the crowd felt like, because that sounds bad, but it’s like we forgot that feeling,” he said. “When I came out, they applauded, and it scared me for a second there. It was like, *Alright guys, there’s real people here.* It was awesome, it was an incredible experience, this is what we do it for.”

Lashley went on to have a memorable per-

formance in his match against McIntyre. Considering they’ve butted heads several times over the last year alone, it was fitting that they squared off to open the big event. “I’ve always enjoyed my matches with Drew,” said Lashley. “Because, man, I’ve always been known to be a little too rough, and I don’t mind being that way. Some guys are content with being number two—as they should be, because, in order to be number one, you have to go through me. But Drew is not that guy. Drew wants to take my spot. Drew will come out swinging, and I appreciate that. I enjoy those kind of fights.”

And, after a hard fight, Lashley shocked fans by earning a submission victory over the former two-time champ. “I put that Hurt Lock on him, and he knows what it feels like,” he said. “That’s the one thing he will have to overcome. He can talk and say whatever he wants, but, at the end of the day, he got locked up and couldn’t get out.”

So, the question is this: What is in the future for Lashley? One dream match that has been looming over him like a black cloud since he entered WWE is a giant showdown with former WWE champion Brock Lesnar. Even Lashley seems surprised they’ve never faced off.

“Maybe I wasn’t the right guy at the time?” he said. “Well, you know what? Now, I’m the freaking champ. And, any time he came back, it was to get the title, and every other champ he’s been in the ring with except me. So, if he ever wants the title back, instead of doing whatever

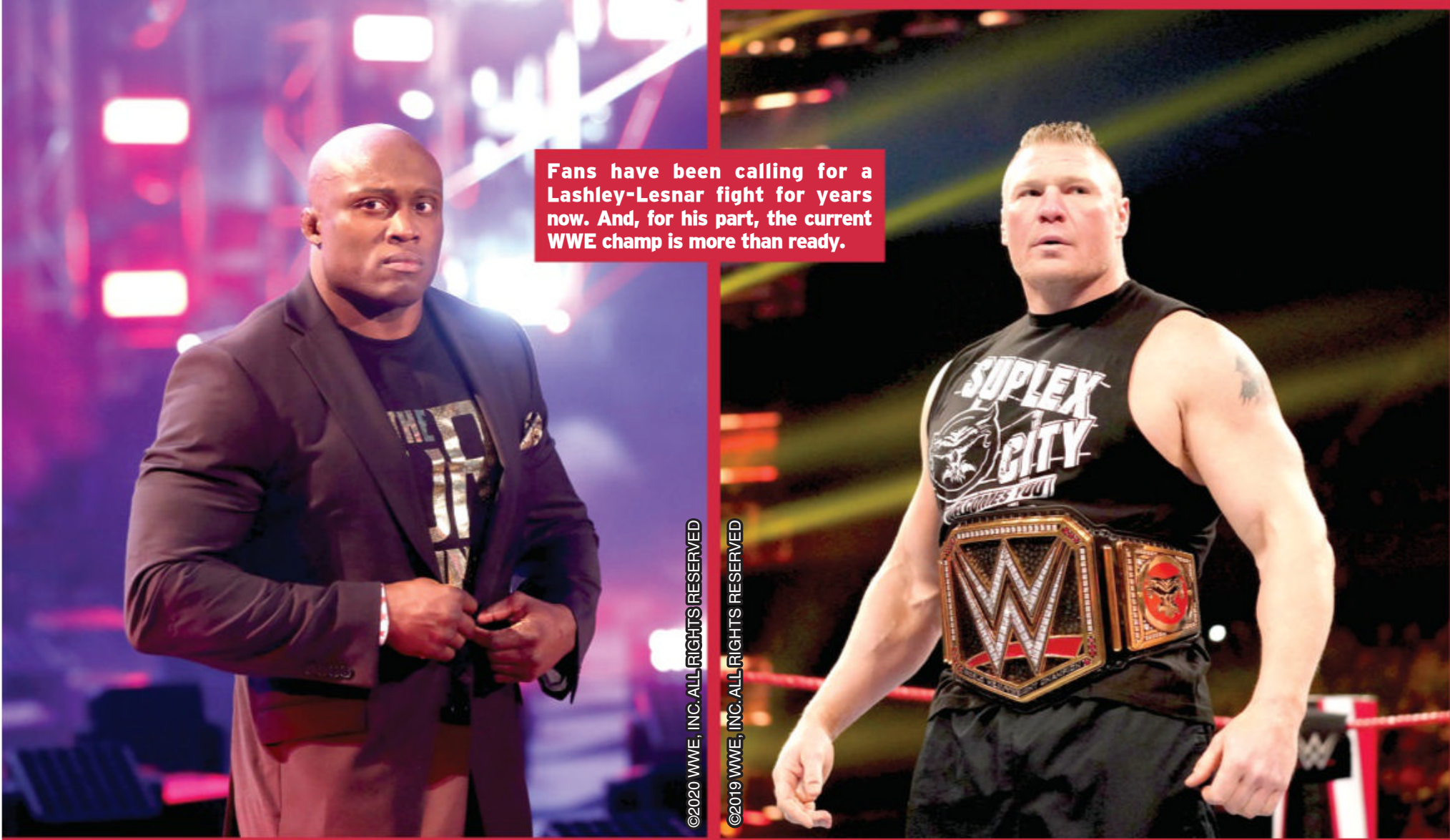
he’s doing, the time is now, the math is right. It’s not like I’m running from him. He has someone to come and fight. Soon enough people are going to be knock-



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**Lashley launches Mustafa Ali through the air with ease. Coupled with his borderline absurd strength, the four-time All-American’s amateur wrestling background has translated into great success in both wrestling and MMA.**





Fans have been calling for a Lashley-Lesnar fight for years now. And, for his part, the current WWE champ is more than ready.

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ing at his door saying, ‘Please come save us from Bobby. He eliminated all the challengers and you’re the only one that can stop him!’ This will be a super fight. Super Bobby vs. Super Brock, we’re going to have the ring suspended from the ceiling.”

Fans have been clamoring for this potential showdown for more than 15 years. It’s no secret that Lashley loves to fight. With a 15-2 MMA record, the WWE champion has been more than ready for a showdown with the

former UFC heavyweight champion Lesnar. This is, for sure, a match worthy of the main event at WrestleMania.

On a potential return to MMA, Lashley jokes, “I’m probably going to have to fight somebody on the street at this point.” There’s still a big part of him that misses the world of mixed martial arts. “I do feel that need to feed the beast in me,” he said. “But I feed my appetite by still going to the gym, doing my boxing and sparring. I mean, if there was something that WWE wanted

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**It takes one special competitor to fend off Ricochet and Seth Rollins at the same time! Whoever dares challenge "The All Mighty" at the peak of his powers does so at their own risk.**

to do [with] a crossover-type event, they have a guy that's ready. I've been waiting for one of those celebrities to call out a pro wrestler for one of those boxing matches! I'm dying to get into one of those. I'll take the boxing match, I'll take the MMA fight, I'll take on any one of them."

But, right now, Lashley is focused on holding onto the WWE championship. And he's very happy to be in the position that he's in. "I've always been quiet, and you've never heard me say a bad word about anyone in the wrestling business," he said. "I was just the guy who

**When Lashley became the first Black wrestler to successfully defend the WWE championship at WrestleMania [opposite page], it was appropriate that MVP was by his side. After all, MVP had been there for his earlier success, too [below].**

worked his ass off the entire time and gave everything he could to the business, as long as he could, and made it to the top ... the tip top. Because, in this industry, the WWE champion is the tip top, and I made it by sheer hard work."

While confident in his abilities, Lashley is also humble, and hasn't forgotten those who've helped him along the way. In fact, that's his advice for WWE's younger stars. "Listen to the people above you coming up," he said.

"Don't think that you know everything. I got a lot of knowledge from the Booker Ts, the 'Takers, the Hunters, and from Vince, of course. That's the legacy I want to leave, that I was a hard-working man that deserved it."

After 16 years, Bobby Lashley's work has paid off. Following in the legacy of world champions like Ron Simmons before him, Lashley achieved greatness by never changing who he was. He was a professional from the very beginning—showing if you just stay the course in the machine known as WWE, outwork everyone in the locker room, and prove that you can be the number one person in the company in all respects, you will climb to the top of the mountain.

Now that he's reached that mountain top, will anyone be able to dethrone "The All Mighty" Lashley? ■



PHOTO BY LEE/SOUTH/IMPACT WRESTLING



# THE VITAL IDOL

## MAKI ITOH'S UNLIKELY RISE TO JOSHI SUPERSTARDOM

TEXT BY JASON McVEIGH

PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW





**What if Destiny's Child had flopped, and  
Beyonce started wrestling instead?  
Introducing Maki Itoh: the jilted pop singer  
who leaned into her failures ... and became a  
surprise hit with grappling fans worldwide.**

IN THE WACKY and wonderful world of professional wrestling, there are colorful characters, there are eccentric characters, and then there is a 25-year-old woman from Fukuoka, Japan, who is pushing the boundaries of what it means to be both of those things.

If your introduction to Maki Itoh came during her appearances for AEW earlier this year, you could be forgiven for wondering just what on earth you were watching. After singing her own entrance music and dancing to the ring, Itoh showcased her unusual brand of offense (and offensive finger gestures) to a large-scale American audience for the first time. While Itoh's

particular style of wrestling may not be to everyone's taste—she notably feuded with Jim Cornette on Twitter earlier this year—even the harshest of critics cannot deny her ability to grab and hold the attention of fans.

If you look deeper, beyond the singing, dancing, and casual swearing, you'll begin to get a picture of who Maki Itoh really is. And what you'll find is a young woman who has overcome much in her life, and one who is using her past hurt and rejection to propel her toward wrestling superstardom.

"My story has not always been a cheerful one," Itoh told *PWI*. "When I was in school, I was bullied, and I battled with mental health issues. On days that I could not bring myself to go to school, I would stay home and sing songs. That is why I decided I wanted to be an idol, so I could escape the situation I was in."

**To the delight of AEW fans, Maki Itoh delivers her signature falling headbutt unto Thunder Rosa.**



PHOTO BY LEE SOUTH/AEW





**Despite her penchant for singing, dancing, and general silliness, Itoh has carved out a reputation as a fierce, determined competitor inside the ring.**

Surprisingly, it was during her time as a LinQ member that Itoh had her first foray into pro wrestling. In 2013, the group was invited to participate in an “Idol Lumberjack Four-Way Match” at a Dynamic Dream Team show. Subsequent appearances for DDT only served to bolster Itoh’s growing affection for wrestling. After her dismissal from LinQ, Itoh began to focus on her burgeoning career in the ring—something that her previous exploits helped prepare her for.

“Being an idol and being a wrestler are similar in that I don’t want to break the image that the fans have in their minds,” she

In Japan, an idol is an entertainer who, usually as a teenager, is recruited to be a part of a manufactured pop group. Idol culture is big business in Japan, and most idols find themselves heavily marketed to a passionate fan base through merchandising and endorsements. At the age of 16, Itoh realized a dream when she was selected to join the J-pop group LinQ. While this provided her a brush with fame, the gig also demanded a lot of hard work. Itoh often spent hours busking in the streets in order to drum up ticket sales for her own concerts. Still, she wasn’t—and still isn’t—afraid of a challenge. And, for a while at least, it seemed like she had found the happiness and belonging she so desperately sought. Unfortunately, the negative emotions that had plagued her during her school days began to creep back in again.

“When I became an idol, I found that life wasn’t that easy,” Itoh said. “I wasn’t popular at all, and I ended up getting fired. But that is what brought me to where I am now. I still sing and dance during my entrance because my idol days were an important formative period that made Maki Itoh who she is today, and I don’t want to forget that part of my history.”

said. “It’s about understanding what the fans expect and taking steps to make sure that happens.”

In 2017, Itoh officially joined Tokyo Joshi Pro Wrestling. Since then, she has stood out as one of its most popular stars. Her matches against the likes of Miyu Yamashita and the veteran Aja Kong are some of the most watched on Wrestle Universe (parent company CyberFight’s streaming service). In 2019, Itoh captured TJPW’s International Princess championship,

**“The Fired Idol” winds up for a big headbutt on Miyu Yamashita at TJPW’s annual January 4 supercard.**





PHOTO BY YUICHI KOJIMA



**Win or lose, Itoh's impressive work ethic has earned the respect of her peers—like Mizuki, who defeated her in the semi-finals of last year's Tokyo Princess Cup tournament.**

which she held for a three-month reign before dropping the title to Thunder Rosa.

Champion or not, Itoh has firmly established herself as a major player in Tokyo Joshi Pro. That's due in part to her work in the ring, but also her mastery of social media, which has allowed the world to see her distinct personality. On platforms like Twitter and Instagram, Itoh's humorous self-deprecation and (admittedly impressive) knowledge of vulgar English vocabulary stand in stark contrast to her schoolgirl attire and bubbly, musical ring entrance.

For those who were familiar with her work in Japan and in a handful of European appearances, the arrival of Maki Itoh in AEW was cause for much excitement. But perhaps there was no one more excited than "The Fired Idol" herself.

"Appearing in AEW was a dream of mine," Itoh reflects. "I still can't forget the pop of the crowd when I appeared unannounced. It was the best moment of my life. My appearance was only ten minutes long, give or take, but the name recognition of Maki Itoh grew so much in that short period of time that it felt like the whole world around me had changed."

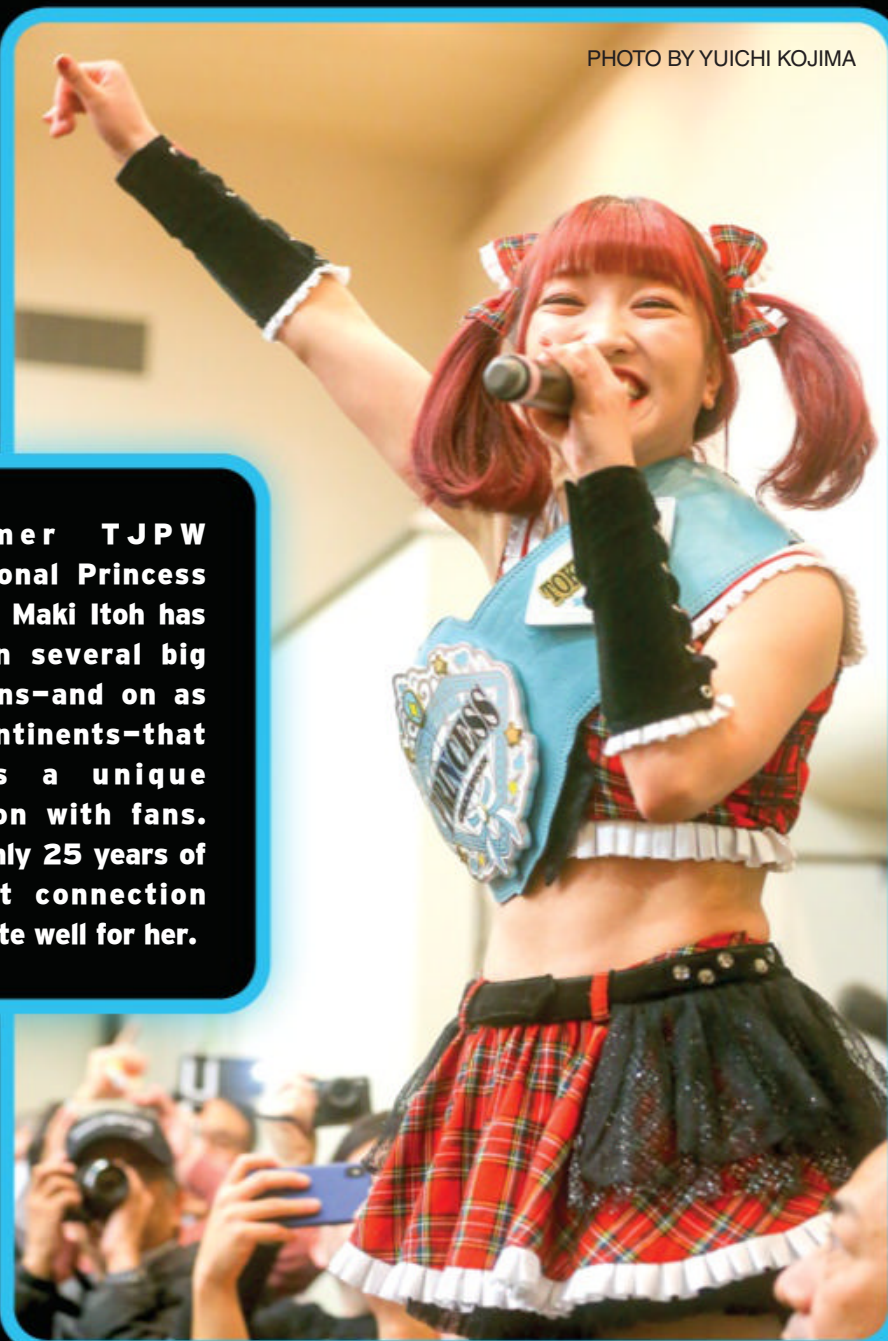
And, indeed, her world *has* changed. Fans from around the globe are now itching to see more from this rising joshi star. In her current role, Itoh finally seems happy with who she is. No longer is she

the schoolgirl tormented by bullies or the manufactured pop singer fired because she wasn't popular enough. Rather, she is a determined young woman winning over fans and critics alike wherever she goes. And it's all thanks to her never-say-die attitude and quirky charisma.

Even as her fan base grows, Itoh is quick to remain grounded, and insists she feels no pressure to prove anything to anyone. "I consider my current situation as me just being very fortunate and getting very lucky, and I am nothing but thankful for it," she said. "I will not try to make myself out to be something that I am not. I will just keep being Maki Itoh, because I can't be anything else but Maki Itoh."

Nearly a decade after she failed to fit the conventional mold of a pop music idol, there's truly no one in the wrestling world quite like Maki Itoh. And we should be glad to have her. ■

PHOTO BY YUICHI KOJIMA



**A former TJPW International Princess champion, Maki Itoh has proven in several big promotions—and on as many continents—that she has a unique connection with fans. And, at only 25 years of age, that connection bodes quite well for her.**



# A CHANGE OF ATMOSPHERE

WHY **LIO RUSH** WILL WIN  
WHEREVER HE GOES

Following the heartbreak of his WWE release, Rush processed his grief, recorded a new album, and then emerged one of wrestling's most in-demand stars.

TEXT BY  
**NICK PERKINS**

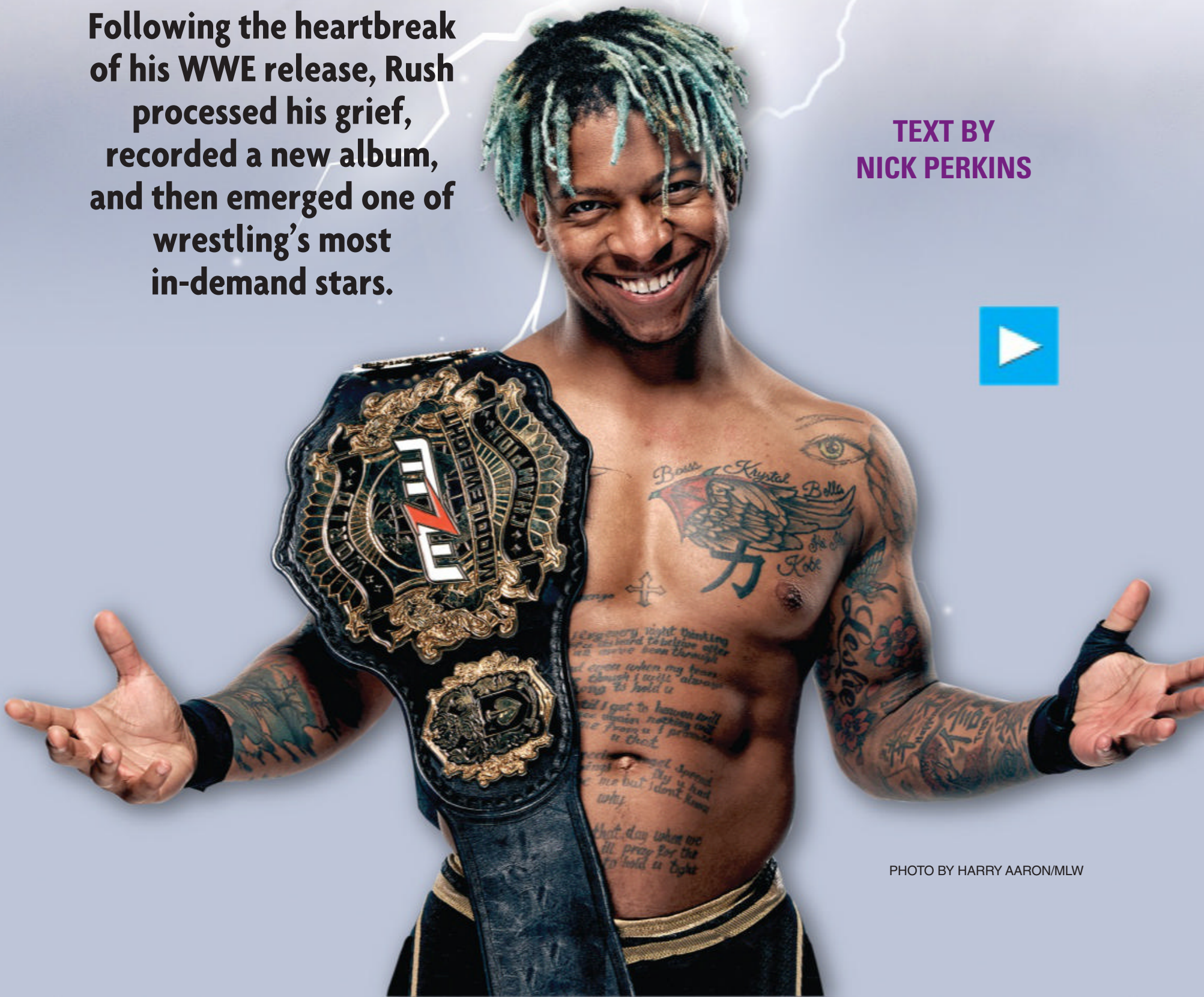


PHOTO BY HARRY AARON/MLW



## WARNING

*This article contains discussion of mental health and suicide. If you or someone you know needs help, call the 24/7 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.*

IT WOULD HAVE been easy to give up on his dream. When former NXT cruiserweight champion Lio Rush was released from his WWE contract in April 2020, he could have hung up his boots and focused solely on his music career. And, in fact, that's almost what he did.

"Time stood still for a very long time that day," Rush said of the moment he was told that he was being released. "I can't even describe the feeling."

Rush, up to that point, had enjoyed a successful—albeit sometimes controversial—run in WWE. He debuted with NXT in 2017, just three years after his first professional match. In 2018, he began competing on *205 Live*, and, in September of that year, he was paired with future WWE champion Bobby Lashley, serving as "The All Mighty's"



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**Well before The Hurt Business was established, Lio Rush helped put over Bobby Lashley as a high-level singles star, and consistently garnered strong reactions from fans.**

hype man and leading him to an Intercontinental championship reign.

Rush and Lashley proved to be quite the pairing. Rush's now-infamous siren song of "Laaashley" was guaranteed to elicit boos and/or groans in every town

where they appeared. He would aid Lashley in the latter's feud with Finn Balor and would even compete against Balor himself for the Intercontinental title. Rush accompanied his charge to the ring for one final title defense against Balor at WrestleMania 35. Soon after, he disappeared from television. Rumors swirled of backstage heat with some of Rush's fellow wrestlers, due to his alleged unwillingness to perform mundane tasks for some of the veterans.

Behind the scenes, Rush was growing more and more frustrated with his role in WWE. He had

**In his Major League Wrestling debut, Rush captured the MLW World middleweight championship from Myron Reed in a thrilling bout. But, were it not for the encouragement of Rush's fans, the match might never have happened.**



PHOTO BY ROBERT STARKZ-BELLAMY/MLW





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**Back in late-2019, Rush hit his stride on NXT programming, beginning a memorable run as the brand's cruiserweight champion.**



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made a few comments on social media expressing his frustration, which, depending on who you ask, is either a courageous move or a kiss of death when it comes to one's career.

"I felt like they saw me as a kid," Rush explained. "You know, I looked like a kid, so sometimes I got treated like one. But I was just trying to get them to take me seriously. I'm a performer, I'm under contract. I have a family, and things needed to be put in order. And they didn't really like me being as vocal as I was, being as new as I was on *Raw*. They kind of wanted me to just shut up and do what I was told."

Rush was taken off TV for a time, but eventually returned to NXT in September 2019, quickly establishing himself as one of the brand's top wrestlers. He won the NXT cruiserweight championship in October, putting on tremendous matches against the likes of Raul Mendoza, Akira Tozawa, and others.

April 15, 2020, would be a turning point. Called "Black Wednesday" by wrestlers and pundits, this was the day WWE released a staggering amount of talent and backstage personnel, including Kurt Angle, Luke Gallows, Karl Anderson, EC3, and Mike & Maria Kanellis. Rush took the initiative to call WWE's Head of Talent Relations, Mark Carrano, himself. When he did, he got the news that part of him already knew was coming.

"He said, 'I'm sorry to say that you are going to be one of the people we release today,'" Rush remembered. "I didn't even ask why. I didn't ask any questions. I took a moment to kind of process what he said, and I just said, 'Thank you for allowing me to be a part of the company, and I hope that one day I'll be back.'"

And that was it. Rush has always been admirably open regarding his mental health issues, and that day in April certainly took a toll on his psyche.

"I was legitimately thinking about not wrestling anymore," he said. "That was a concrete thought in my head, and I was talking to my family about it on a daily basis. It's almost like that part of myself kind of died. Being in WWE was what I dedicated my entire life to. And then, when it's just over in one day, it put me in a mental state that I will never forget."

**Lio Rush's first independent run put him on WWE's radar. Now, he's returned to the indies to redefine himself.**

**Below: Rush battles Ricochet in front of a hot crowd at Pro Wrestling Guerrilla. Opposite page: The "Blackheart" defeats Jordan Oliver by submission at Joey Janela's Spring Break 5.**

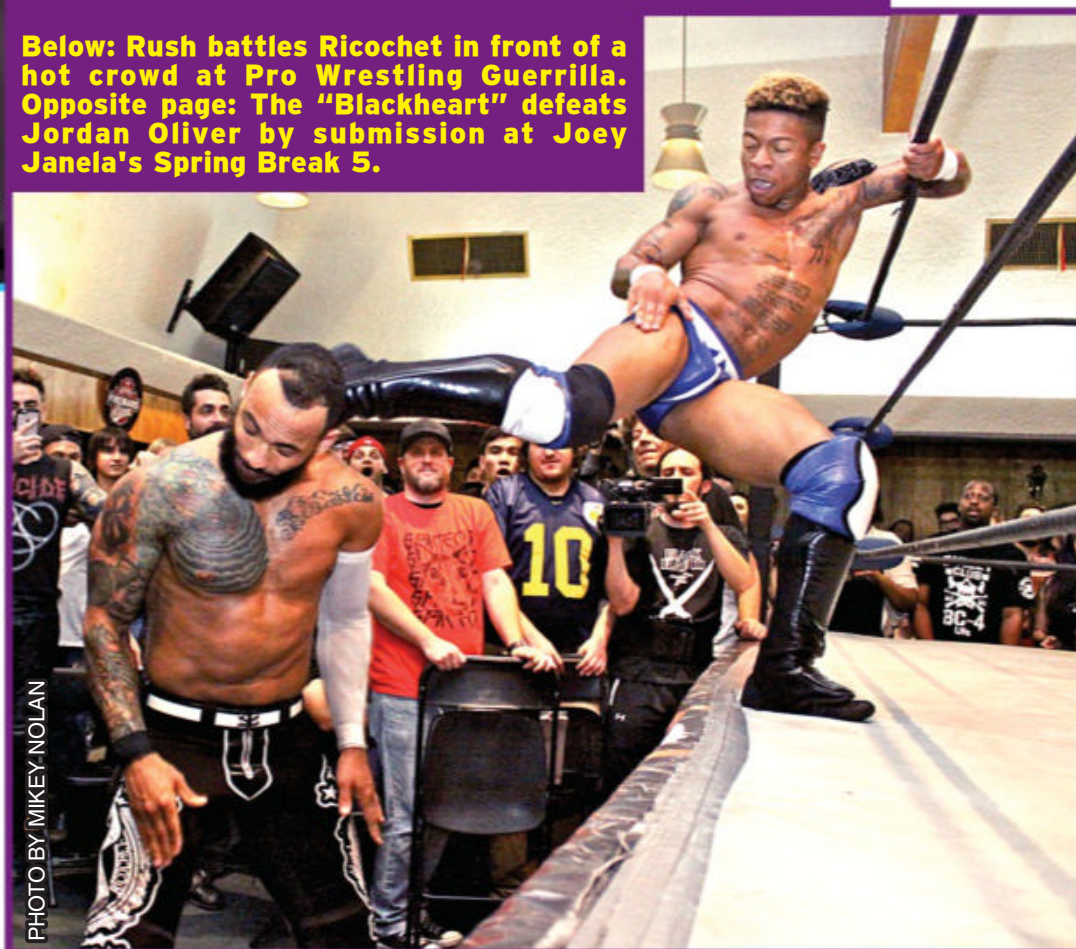


PHOTO BY MIKEY NOLAN



Rush said the days following that phone call were some of the darkest of his life. Years ago, he had attempted suicide. And, as anybody with mental health issues can attest, even when dark thoughts are buried deep under a blanket of therapy and self-care, they can still present themselves at a moment's notice. Thankfully, Rush's hard work in therapy helped him to cope.

"A lot of those thoughts got brushed to the side, just because I knew how to control it a little better," he said. "I knew how to navigate through my emotions and register what I was going through and process things a little better. I was in therapy for two years straight, I was going every week, and WWE actually paid for that, which I'm incredibly thankful for. I told them how I was feeling on a daily basis, and I told them I needed help, so they paid for me to go to therapy once a week, every week. So, I knew how to deal with my emotions a little better when I got the call, but I still had those thoughts. They were still there."

But there were other thoughts, too. And those thoughts were stronger. Eventually, Rush picked himself up, looked in the mirror, and reminded himself that he is the one who controls his destiny.

In the year following his release from World Wrestling Entertainment, Rush focused more on his musical career. In addition to being a professional wrestler, Rush is also a professional rapper. He built a

Rush puts the boots to Brian Pillman Jr., whom he defeated in his second defense of the World middleweight title.

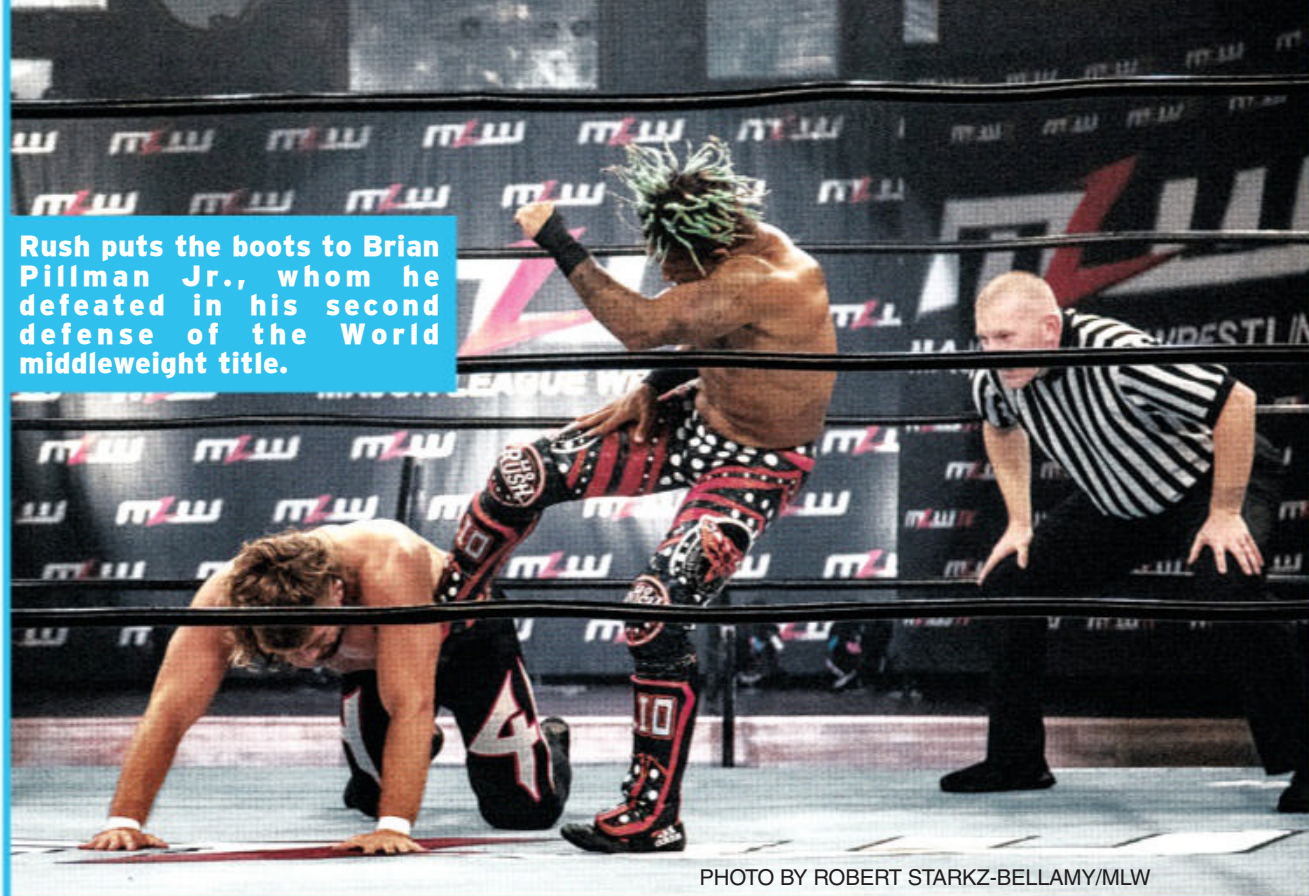


PHOTO BY ROBERT STARKZ-BELLAMY/MLW

studio in his home and continued to produce albums, one of which was released in July 2020, called *The Final Match*.

Luckily for fans, Rush has certainly not wrestled his final match. Actually, his career is hotter than it's ever been. He's been a featured performer for companies like Major League Wrestling, AAA, and New Japan, all while tearing it up on the independent circuit—most notably, Game Changer Wrestling, where his eerie "Blackheart" persona generated plenty of buzz.

At press time, Lio Rush is the reigning MLW World middleweight champion, and was briefly the AAA World cruiserweight champion after beating Laredo Kid in a title vs. title bout. His simultaneous success in multiple companies is reminiscent of Cody Rhodes and AJ Styles, after they departed WWE and Impact Wrestling, respectively. Meanwhile, his musical career, along with his acting career, is picking up. And, most importantly, he's happy. He believes in himself.

"After I got that call, there was a lot of thinking about what was next for me," Rush reflected. "Because I've tried to be so honest with my fans, I feel like I've grown a strong fan base, and they wouldn't let me stop wrestling. They would tell me every day, 'You need to get back out there. You need to show the world that you are still Lio Rush without WWE.'"

Rush, age 26, has been through a lot in his young life. But, every time he's been knocked down, he gets back up stronger. He's stopped looking at things as if they were happening *to* him and started looking at things as if they were happening *for* him. That's made all the difference, and taught him the most important lesson of his life and career.

"Take it from me, because I just learned this lesson myself," he said. "Nobody is going to believe in you as much as you believe in yourself." ■



PHOTO BY CHRIS GRASSO



A photograph of a young man, A-Kid, in a wrestling ring. He is shirtless, wearing yellow and black wrestling trunks, and is smiling while leaning over a large silver trophy. The trophy is the Heritage Cup, featuring the NXT logo on its base. The background shows the red ropes of the wrestling ring and bright arena lights.

# ANONYMOUS NO MORE

A-KID LOOKS BACK ON THE  
MATCH THAT CHANGED HIS  
LIFE FOREVER

TEXT BY FRANCESCO "FRANK" MANDOLINI



**Spain has never been a big wrestling country ... at least, not until A-Kid showed up. WWE's first Spanish-born champ discusses wrestling in his native country, winning the Heritage Cup, and the in-ring encounter that changed everything.**

**T**HIS IS THE story of a specific point in time—a day, a match, and a moment that turned out to be pivotal for both a young man's wrestling career and for wrestling as a whole in his native country. And here's the kicker: On that same day, he was ready to quit the business for good.

The wrestler in question is NXT U.K.'s own A-Kid, the reigning WWE Heritage Cup champion, who, just as he was entering the ring in his native Madrid to face a still-unsigned Ricochet, made peace with the idea that this could have been his last wrestling match ever. "Worst case scenario, I'd quit anyway," he said to himself, as he made his way into the squared circle.

But let's press pause here for a moment and rewind the tape back just a little. Sliding doors moments—where something huge emerges from something small and seemingly inconsequential—happen in life (and wrestling) all the time. What makes this one so peculiar is that it happened in Madrid, Spain, a place quite far away from any traditional wrestling hotbed.

A-Kid was born and bred in Vallecas, a working-class suburb of the Spanish capital where inhabitants are more likely to religiously watch the matches of their local soccer team, the Rayo Vallecano, than they are to turn on the TV to catch *Monday Night Raw* or *Smackdown*. In fact, those shows aren't even an option on Spanish national TV.

But on that fateful day in January 2017, A-Kid had an appointment with destiny—the

PHOTO BY DANIEL ALONSO/TRIPLE W



**Disheartened by his future prospects, A-Kid was ready to call it a career at a very young age ... but then, he faced Ricochet in a widely celebrated match that put both him and Spanish wrestling on the map.**

showdown that effectively put him on the map worldwide, starting

his unlikely journey to NXT U.K.

The young, athletic A-Kid was handpicked to face Ricochet—the first big, international wrestler to work for the Madrid-based promotion White Wolf Wrestling (Triple W)—inside the Tabacalera, a ramshackle venue in Lavapiés, one of the most historical, culturally diverse, and vibrant neighborhoods of Madrid. The public venue, with its corridors, arcs, and columns, is generally used by the local government for concerts, events, and art exhibits. On that night, it played host to the match that changed A-Kid's life.

After entering the ring to the strains of Papa Roach's "Last Resort" and the chants of "*Niño Anonimo*" (Anonymous Kid), the Spanish grappler locked eyes with a young lady standing ringside, rolled out of the ring, and kissed her. This was Sara Leon, A-Kid's girlfriend and fellow wrestler.



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**The first Spanish-born wrestler under WWE contract, A-Kid has become one of the most exciting stars on the NXT U.K. brand.**





**You can see it in his eyes: A-Kid knows he's about to submit Trent Seven and become the inaugural NXT U.K. Heritage Cup champion.**

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"I almost never think about my entrance beforehand," he recalled. "But her being there for me in that moment helped lots. I needed to do something to tell her I loved her."

The match itself was an incredible performance by both men involved. "I had no pressure going in," A-Kid said. "I just wanted to have fun and check if I was able to hang with the best independent wrestler in the world." Spoiler alert: The "Anonymous Kid" from Vallecas succeeded.

At the time, he didn't even realize how much this match would change his life. As buzz around the match spread on social media, A-Kid was oblivious, not having any social media accounts himself. His tag partner, Carlos Romo,

informed him that people were talking about the match online. "How many people?" A-Kid asked. "Five?"

And it's with this kind of humility that A-Kid started to follow Ricochet's advice: "Travel the world, wrestle the best, and learn from them." Doing that, he succeeded in something that no Spanish wrestler before him ever did: landing a WWE contract.

Fast forward to November 2020, when A-Kid was now a WWE superstar tearing it up on the NXT U.K. brand. Having vanquished opponents Flash Morgan Webster and Noam Dar, he reached the finals of WWE's Heritage Cup tournament, where he became an underdog against the veteran Trent Seven.

The tournament was disputed under British Rounds rules, which meant matches made up of six three-minute rounds with 20-second breaks between each round. Each match was best-of-three falls, decided by pinfall, submission, or countout.

Almost no one would have predicted A-Kid to go this far in the tournament, but what many people didn't



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**Since winning the Heritage Cup, A-Kid has defended it as a secondary title, including in this victory over Tyler Bate last December.**



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Despite his small frame, the Vallecas native isn't intimidated by larger opponents, like WALTER, whom he unsuccessfully challenged for the NXT U.K. championship back in January.

One can't help but think about the fact that, prior to his match with

Ricochet, this talented young man was about to quit the sport for good. "The Spanish scene wasn't big enough," he said. "I thought I wasn't gonna make it." Now, he hasn't just made it, he's a champion in WWE ... and someone a new generation of Spanish fans can look up to, given his multiple appearances on national media.

After winning the Heritage Cup, A-Kid quickly realized he couldn't soak in the joy

know was that the boy from Vallecas had a background in MMA, and that the *World of Sport* era of wrestling, when British Rounds rules became famous, is his bread and butter. A-Kid cites Fit Finlay, Johnny Saint, and Steve Grey as wrestlers he's enjoyed studying.

"I try to use their influence, adapt it to a modern style and fit it into the rules of the Heritage Cup in NXT U.K.," he said, adding that this style makes him more mentally agile, and more open to trying different things.

Trent Seven was just one more obstacle thrown his way. And, after the grueling six rounds ended in a tie, the match went to sudden death. A-Kid had scored his point at the beginning of the bout, while Seven evened the odds with a few seconds to go in the last round, entering the overtime with a little bit of an advantage.

It was in that moment A-Kid dug down deep in his arsenal, reversing a LeBell lock with one of his own on both of Seven's arms, submitting his foe after a few seconds of agony.

After the match, A-Kid fell to his knees with a liberating scream into the Heritage Cup, inside the silent environment of the BT Studios in London—a polar opposite of the raucous crowd of the Tabacalera, but with the same symbolic importance for the young man's career. This was the first time that a Spanish wrestler had won a championship in WWE.

Ricochet advised A-Kid to travel the world and learn from his opponents. And, now that they're both signed to WWE, A-Kid would love to show Ricochet everything he's learned since their last encounter.

for too long. "It's a sensation that lasts just one day, then you reset to new goals," he said. "You think about defending it, make your championship run unique. In wrestling, you never feel like you've accomplished too much."

The next bucket list item for A-Kid is an NXT U.K. TakeOver appearance to defend his prized Cup. And, who knows? Now that they both work for the same company, a rematch with Ricochet might be in the cards somewhere down the line. "Of course, I'd love to," he said. "I don't think there's anyone in the world who wouldn't want to be in the ring with him." ■



PHOTO BY DANIEL ALONSO/TRIPLEW



# "A VICTIM OF SUPPORTIVE PARENTS"

## THE RJ CITY STORY

TEXT BY KARI WILLIAMS

R

J CITY HAS been blocked on Twitter by President Donald Trump, become frenemies with David Arquette, and secured a non-wrestling role on WWE's digital platforms. All because he was the "victim of supportive parents."

"Home video footage suggests that I have been doing wrestling promos since before I could really talk," said City, age 32. His goal to be unlike everyone else has yielded a character people either love or hate.

"Companies will have an opening for it or they won't," City said. "And that's kind of the hill you have to die on, in a sense."

And still, opportunities have managed to present themselves for the self-deprecating, *Golden Girls*-loving wrestler who found a place in the WWE Universe—or, at least, on its Network.

City was Arquette's "uninvited guest" on a WWE Zoom call last May, after which the Toronto native began appearing regularly on *The Bump* and *Watch Along*. Most recently, he hosted the profoundly silly *WrestleMania After Dark*. But he still isn't sure what prompted WWE to bring him into the fold.

"It's odd. I'm kind of like this downloadable character," he said. "Or I'm like the wacky neighbor who lives down the hall from WWE."


Nug Nahrgang, comedian and occasional RJ City manager, noted that *The Bump* was "such a backdoor way" into WWE. "He's going to get a legends contract before he gets a contract," Nahrgang said.



PHOTO BY JUSTIN COTTERELL

RJ City found an unlikely friend (and rival) in actor David Arquette, who initially seemed confused by City's antics—not an uncommon reaction, as it turns out.





**He's uncompromising.  
Enterprising. And  
anything but  
tranquilizing. In a  
wrestling landscape  
where bravado and  
aggression are expected,  
City has won over fans  
with humility and humor.**

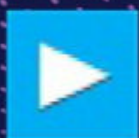


PHOTO BY ANDREA KELLAWAY PHOTOGRAPHY





Like Colt Cabana (pictured monkey-flipping his opponent), City has dabbled in comedy ... and used it to great effect in his matches.

knows it's our job to entertain the audience, and, 99% of the time, he does it with just his voice. RJ is a very good wrestler, but nobody else can offer what RJ can when handed a microphone."

Nahrgang, who has known City since the early 2000s, first met City at an indie show and suggested he participate in an

At the time, City thought his debut Zoom appearance would be a "fun glitch" in history that would be edited out. "To their credit, not once have I been given a note or told to do anything ... I'm just doing my stuff," he said.

improv night at Toronto's Bad Dog Theatre.

"After his first time doing that, I had the instructor call me and ask who the hell this guy was," Nahrgang said. "I think for two reasons. One, because he was just very good for a guy coming in off the streets, and two, he's a very handsome man, and that's a rare thing in comedy."

"The old comedy people were freaks," said Eric Johnston, comedian, City's *Splatalot* costar, and son of Canadian Wrestling Hall-of-Famer "Bullwhip" Danny

## THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

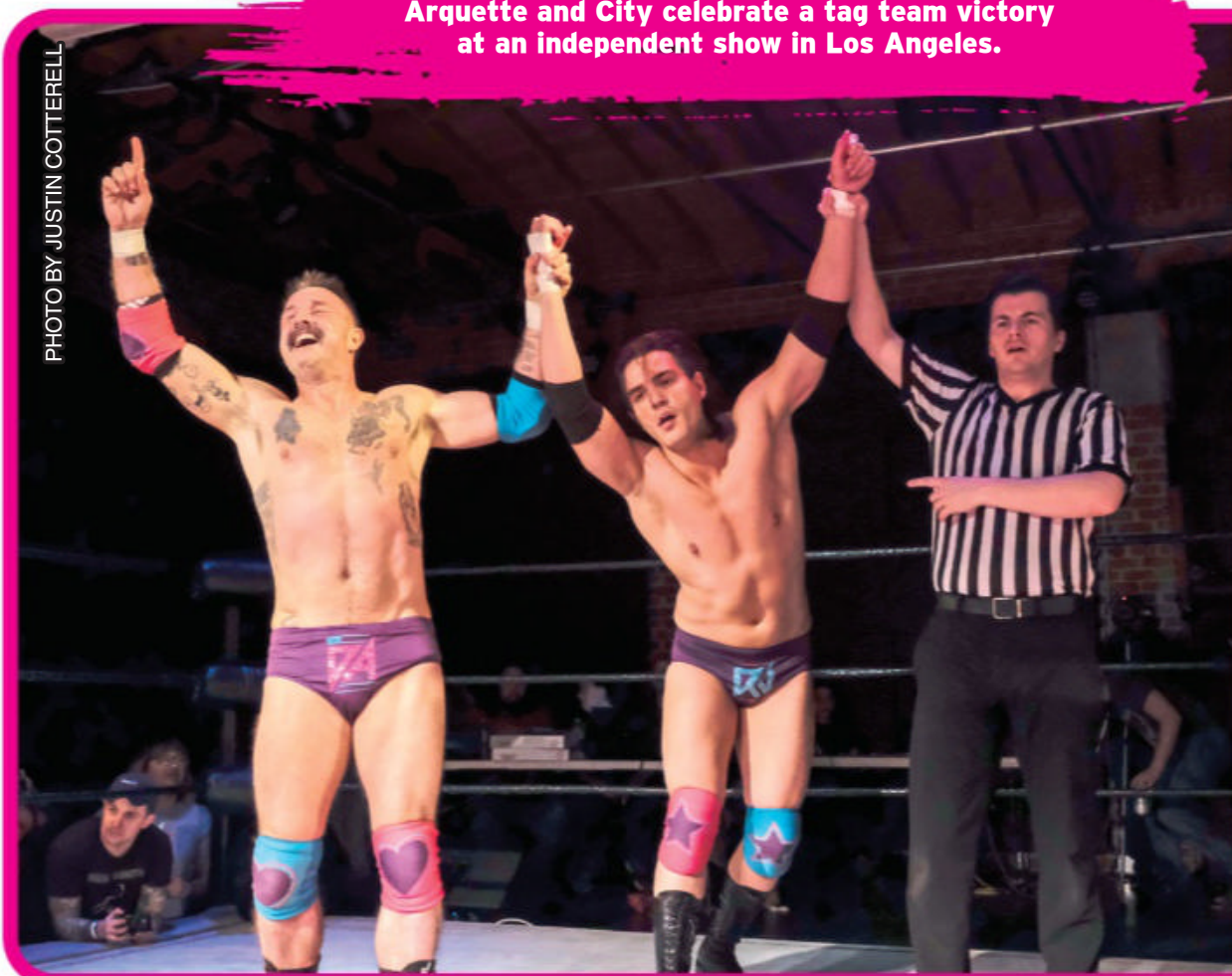
City, who took improv classes as a child, learned to wrestle as a teenager under Canadian journeyman Ruffy Silverstein. He simultaneously trained, worked the Ontario independent scene, and attended Ryerson University, where he majored in Culture and Entertainment.

"On my way out, I ended up in a movie called *Monster Brawl* and [the Canadian TV show] *Splatalot* at the same time," City said. "Both kind of fell out of the sky in the sense that people reached out to me. I wasn't auditioning for stuff."

Former ROH champion Dalton Castle says City is one of the most talented performers he has ever met, noting his quick wit, obscure references, and sense of humor.

"Most people on wrestling shows seem to always try to first present themselves as tough or cool, whereas RJ seems to focus on the important part: the 'show,'" Castle said. "He

Arquette and City celebrate a tag team victory at an independent show in Los Angeles.





**"I think people relate to me just being okay with things being a mess. And I think that's nice for people and encourages people. It's okay to say things suck."  
—RJ City**

Johnston. "They all looked weird, had a weird tic, dressed weird. The guy's gorgeous. Just ask him ...he'll tell you."

City's trademark interest in show tunes and dated pop culture entered the squared circle by happenstance. "I was just messing around, and someone had suggested I should grab the microphone and sing my own name," he recalled. "And I did, and I got certainly more heat than I ever did before."



PHOTO BY JUSTIN COTTERELL

A 2018 war of words led to a match at Championship Wrestling from Hollywood, which was featured in the documentary, *You Cannot Kill David Arquette*.

## SOCIAL MEDIA MAVEN

In the COVID-19 era, Twitter has become City's microphone.

"A lot of wrestlers don't stay in character," Nahrgang said. "And the best thing about RJ is it's not a character, it's just him. He's just in the middle of an online ring instead."

From his adoration of Ethel Merman to watching Jerry Lewis sketches backstage, Johnston confirms City's portrayal is legitimate. "There's no B.S., and I think that's the magic of it," he said.

While City's social media presence has grown steadily due to viral videos and clever tweets, not everyone has been amused. Once, when former President Trump tweeted negatively about the CBC and CNN, City responded, "What about *WKRP in Cincinnati*?" (in reference to the classic sitcom). He was quickly blocked.

Unlike many other grapplers, City doesn't shy away from tweeting about his anxieties. "I see a lot of lines of positivity or aggressive confidence, and I certainly don't find it accurate in my life," he said. "I think people relate to me just being okay with things relatively being a mess. And I think that's nice for people and encourages people. It's okay to say things suck."

City's social media buzz helped initiate the begrudging bond between himself and actor-turned-wrestler Arquette. Ben Joseph, a mutual friend, connected them on Twitter. And then ...

"I decided to call him out," City said. "I don't think he understood what I was doing."

## COFFEE AND SAFETY

City's openness about mental health carries over to his popular YouTube show, *RJ City Makes Coffee in his Underwear*. He treats the Sunday morning livestream as a standup set, sometimes blurting out things that take off—like warning viewers about an impending heel turn.

"I don't know any other [talk] show that has had Steve Austin and Mario Cantone," City said. "But that's also perfectly me. That's like the middle of my Venn diagram. It's also a testament to how all this stuff is the same. Ideally, I can be a bridge between wrestling and entertainment."

And City's unique persona might well be adding to his career longevity. In the 2021 Fight Network documentary, *RJ City: Wrestling Raconteur*, City revealed that veteran grapplers have told him they like wrestling him because they know they won't get hurt.

"I didn't want to have just one match in my life, just a couple crazy bumps and a short career," City said, adding he'd rather be like Roddy Piper or Nick Bockwinkel, who wrestled into his 50s. "This is a marathon to me, and I do love doing it. The key to that, I think, is safety."

"It's like an analogy with improv," he continued. "You're not just going to leave your scene partner out there. You're not going to let them bomb, because you're in a scene together."

And, as far as RJ City's future goes, Johnston said the only person standing in the way is City himself. "The entire world needs to experience what RJ City is and what he can deliver," Johnston said. "I think the world is getting there, and I can't wait for that moment where it really goes over." ■



## KENTA

**B**ORN MARCH 12, 1981 in Soka, Japan ... Trained by the legendary Kenta Kobashi and Yoshihiro Takayama ... Made his in-ring debut for All Japan Pro Wrestling in the spring of 2000 under his real name, Kenta Kobayashi ... As part of the Mitsuharu Misawa-led exodus of talent, left AJPW and debuted for Misawa's new Pro Wrestling NOAH promotion that summer ... In July 2001, adopted the new name of KENTA and began to solidify his position as one of NOAH's top junior heavyweights ... Reached the final of the tournament for NOAH's vacant GHC junior heavyweight title before falling to Yoshinobu Kanemaru ... Forged a successful alliance with Naomichi Marufuji that resulted in the duo becoming the inaugural GHC junior heavyweight tag champs, defeating Takehiro Murahama and Jushin Liger in the tournament final ... Held the junior tag straps for almost two years, unsuccessfully trying to add singles championship gold to his resume during this time ... After dropping the junior tag belts to Kanemaru and Takashi Sugiura, rebounded a month later and finally captured the elusive GHC junior heavyweight title by defeating the former ... Enjoyed a 321-day run as champion ... Began making trips to Ring of Honor in 2006 as part of their talent-sharing agreement with NOAH, scoring victories over Roderick Strong, Bryan Danielson (Daniel Bryan), and Samoa Joe ...

On home soil, failed to defeat old partner Marufuji for the GHC heavyweight title in a stellar outing and fell to Takeshi Morishima in a war for the ROH strap ... Formed a successful partnership with Taiji Ishimori that saw them win the 2007 and 2008 NOAH Junior Tag Leagues, as well as the GHC junior tag team championship ... Became a two-time junior singles champion by defeating Bryan Danielson in the fall of 2008 ... Dropped the GHC junior title to Katsuhiko Nakajima on February

Osaka ... Went on to hold NOAH's top title for almost a year ... After attending a tryout—with Pro Wrestling NOAH's blessing—achieved a lifelong dream by signing with WWE ... Arrived in NXT under the new moniker “Hideo Itami” to great fanfare, but momentum was continually derailed by injuries ... Did come close to dethroning NXT champion Bobby Roode at TakeOver: Chicago in 2016 before developing a darker persona for feuds with Kassius Ohno and Aleister Black ... Tried his luck on *205 Live*, but never managed to bag the cruiserweight title ... He was released by WWE in February 2019 ... Made a surprise debut for New Japan Pro-Wrestling and soon aligned himself with the Bullet Club ... NJPW highlights have included defeating Tomohiro Ishii in London to capture the NEVER openweight title and winning the New Japan of America tournament to earn a shot at the IWGP U.S. championship

... Defended his status as number-one contender for the U.S. title against several challengers while travel restrictions kept him and champion Jon Moxley apart ... Finally made it stateside, shockingly attacking Moxley on the February 3, 2021, episode of *AEW Dynamite* ... Received his long-awaited U.S. title shot at The New Beginning U.S.A. show but was defeated ... Has said his time in WWE was the most frustrating of his career, but has since experienced a resurgence in NJPW. ■



KENTA connects with a corner dropkick on Juice Robinson. Since hitching his wagon to New Japan, the former NEVER openweight champ has established himself as one of the company's brightest singles stars.

11, 2009, only to regain it on March 1, which began a 243-day reign ... After seven months on the shelf due to a knee injury, returned and won his third junior heavyweight tag title in May 2011, this time with old rival Kanemaru ... After being sidelined again for the first half of 2012, set his sights on moving up to the heavyweight ranks ... Won that year's Global League tourney, earning himself a GHC heavyweight title shot, and then dethroned champion Takeshi Morishima on January 27, 2013, in







# 12 QUESTIONS

with **"THE METAL MANIAC"**  
**SLEDGE**

**Y**ou're given the chance to interview your favorite wrestler. What questions are you dying to ask them?

**1 YOU SIGNED WITH RING OF HONOR RIGHT BEFORE THE COMPANY SHUT DOWN DUE TO THE PANDEMIC. WHAT WAS GOING THROUGH YOUR MIND AS ALL THAT WAS HAPPENING?**

**MMS:** That somebody finally signed Sledge, so the world decided to crash [laughs]. At the same time, it wasn't that bad for me. It was a time for me to reset mentally, physically, and emotionally.

**2 HOW DID THE ROH DOJO COMPARE TO ANY EXPECTATIONS YOU MIGHT HAVE HAD FOR IT?**

**MMS:** The Dojo is great. Working with Will Ferrara and Jonathan Gresham was a great learning experience. And the other wrestlers at the Dojo really made me up my game.

**3 YOU'VE BEEN OPEN ABOUT YOUR BATTLES WITH ADDICTION. IF SOMEONE READING THIS IS HAVING SIMILAR ISSUES, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO THEM?**

**MMS:** Don't give up. There's a reason why you're put on this planet, and you have to find it. And, once you find that reason, then go headfirst into it. The world is what you make it.

**4 YOU'RE A SELF-PROFESSED METALHEAD. WHAT MUSIC DO YOU LISTEN TO IN ORDER TO GET PUMPED UP FOR A MATCH?**

**MMS:** Everything from I Prevail to Pantera to Metallica. Brody King's band, God's Hate, is really good. If it gets me to slam some weights or some people, then I'm ready to go.

**5 BEFORE SIGNING WITH ROH, YOU WERE**

**BASED ON THE WEST COAST. EAST COAST CROWDS CAN BE TOUGH. ARE YOU NERVOUS ABOUT COMPETING IN FRONT OF THOSE FANS?**

**MMS:** No, because I wrestled for a short time on the East Coast. I did Northeast Wrestling. I did some stuff for Cheeseburger. I think I'm going to fit very well in that hard-hitting East Coast style, because that's *my* style.

**6 YOU RECENTLY MADE YOUR OFFICIAL DEBUT FOR RING OF HONOR, FACING O'SHAY EDWARDS. TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT BEING IN THE RING WITH A BIG, TOUGH DUDE LIKE O'SHAY.**

**MMS:** He's a hard-hitting son of a \*\*\*\*\*. We did two time-limit draws, man, and we're on the verge of going to a third round. And, if it does, I guarantee I'm gonna leave his ass laying.

**7 YOU WERE VOTED FAVORITE FUTURE OF HONOR STAR BY THE FANS. DO YOU THINK YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE HELPED YOU THERE?**

**MMS:** I do. You could've done one of two things during this pandemic: stood still, or try to take advantage of it. People at home needed something to watch. So, I tried to give that to them with my YouTube and Twitch content.

**8 WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE SNACK FOR AFTER A MATCH/WORKOUT?**

**MMS:** Chili mango. I love hot food, man. I always have jalapenos in my meals. Anything that's going to make me sweat or have a burn in the back of my throat, I'm all about it.

**9 DID PLAYING IN A BAND WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER PREPARE YOU FOR THE RING?**

**MMS:** Yes, absolutely. The music business is just like the wrestling business. You'll get as much out of it as you hustle for.

**10 YOU COULD PROBABLY BE CALLED A POWER WRESTLER, BUT YOU'RE NO STRANGER TO THE MAT. DO YOU SEE YOURSELF MAKING AN IMPACT IN THE PURE DIVISION?**

**MMS:** I would love to. I was *just* thinking about that. And then you have another big guy like Dak Draper, who just wrestled Jonathan Gresham and almost beat him. I would love to get in the Pure division and show what I can do.

**11 WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR THE NEXT FEW YEARS, INSIDE THE RING AND OUT?**

**MMS:** Outside the ring, I would like to travel around to schools and motivate kids. If you have stuff going on at home or you battle depression—I started battling depression around 12 years old, after my father passed—to let them know that, "Hey, it's going to be okay." In the ring, I see myself being the Television champion, the World champion, finding some people that actually like me and becoming the six-man tag team champions. I'm in it to win it.

**12 FINALLY, MANY OF US WOULD CONSIDER IT A BIG FAVOR IF YOU COULD GET BRIAN JOHNSON TO JUST SHUT UP ALREADY. ANY INTEREST?**

**MMS:** Oh man. That's "The Mecca" you're talking about! I swear, if he yells just a little bit harder, that head vein is going to burst. I would love to shut Brian Johnson up. I really would. ■



# **“THE METAL MANIAC” SLEDGE**



PHOTO BY RING OF HONOR/MIKE ADAMS



# PUNCHING UP

WITH JORDYNNE GRACE

**B**ODY POSITIVITY IN pro wrestling may seem like an abstract concept, especially as wrestlers and fans alike have had it drilled into their heads since its inception that this is an “aesthetic” business. But after being told to look a certain way, be a certain height, be a certain weight, be more muscular, be “larger than life,” many wrestlers have struggled with mental health issues, developed eating disorders, and suffered the effects of steroid abuse. Athletes, in general, are prone to struggle with body image issues, and pro wrestling is an “all eyes on you” business, resulting in even more scrutiny.

What exactly does body positivity mean? Isn't it just an excuse for people to celebrate being out of shape? The answer is a resounding “No.” Body positivity

is an assertion or belief that all people deserve to have a positive body image, and this isn't specific to weight or size. Body positivity also refers to height, race, gender, sexuality, and disability. People who have a positive relationship with their bodies are more likely to develop healthier habits and are at a decreased risk for depression and eating disorders. In short, looking at your body as it is *now* in a positive light can help you achieve any health-related goals you have set for yourself.

Because wrestlers are often judged harshly based solely on appearance, it can be difficult for them to feel confident and love their bodies, despite all the incredible tasks they're able to accomplish. Wrestlers put their bodies through the wringer

constantly, and yet look in the mirror and can't see the beauty in that. With social media, it can be even harder to feel good because of the constant attacks. The negativity almost seeps through the screen at times.

During WrestleMania weekend, I decided to host a “Body Positivity Photoshoot,” in hopes of empowering others to love their bodies in spite of what they perceive as flaws. In total, 10 women and one man attended the photoshoot. The photo shown here is demonstrative of 11 incredible athletes of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and shows us that there's not a “standard” body for wrestlers anymore. It's high time we accept that and show support and love for these athletes.

I asked some of the attendees of the photoshoot what body positivity means to them. Lady Frost, who has appeared for WWE, AEW, and ROH since her debut in 2018, had this to say: “Most of what we enjoy about professional wrestling is its unique quirks and attention to those who stand out. We celebrate the variety of the sport, and we should, just the same, celebrate the variety of athletes that come with it. No human is created identically; but that doesn't make any one less beautiful. I was honored to support

PHOTO BY HARRY AARON



## THIS IS WHAT A PROFESSIONAL WRESTLER LOOKS LIKE.

Over WrestleMania weekend, 11 wrestlers converged for a “Body Positivity Photoshoot” celebrating diverse body types in professional wrestling. From left to right: Mazzerati, Davienne, Alejandra Lion, Dillon McQueen, Nevaeh Chantelle, Holidoad, Jordynne Grace, Lady Frost, Faye Jackson, Katalina Perez, Becca





Anytime she's appeared in this magazine, Holidead has sported her signature face paint. For the Body Positivity Photoshoot, the indie standout opted to show the face she sees in the mirror every morning.

something that transcends professional wrestling. Body positivity can be a struggle. It is a commitment, yet ultimate gratification in love and acceptance."

Dillon McQueen, the only man who expressed interest in the shoot—and who has struggled extensively with body issues in the past, only just recently being able to overcome some of that deeply seeded doubt—said that, to him, body positivity means to "be at peace with yourself regardless of size." McQueen recently graduated from the Nightmare Factory, where he was able to work with personal trainers and dieticians to finally achieve his body goals in a safe, healthy, and empowering way.

Holidead, a wrestler normally easily recognizable from her

distinctive face paint, chose to bare it all for this photoshoot with a fresh face. "Body positivity is exactly what it sounds like: being happy and comfortable with the skin you're in," she said. "In all facets of life, we are all on our own journeys, and we must stop the comparison of ours to anyone else's, and learn to embrace where we are, how far we've come, and focus on where we want to be."

Katalina Perez, who debuted in 2018 and has made several appearances for AEW, told me, "Body positivity, to me, means loving the skin you're in. Learn to embrace every flaw, practice self-love, and know true beauty comes from within."

Davienne is a 26-year-old wrestler from Massachusetts who

trained under Brian Fury and ranked 81 on the *PWI* "Women's 100" list in 2020. To her, body positivity means "appreciating that my body is uniquely my own and to not compare my body to others. While there can always be room for improvement and more goals to reach, my body has the ability to do what I'm passionate about, and I love my body for that."

The body positivity movement has yielded overwhelmingly positive results, despite the demons of social media, where people are portrayed as completely flawless—which can create a mental block that many aren't able to easily overcome. And most who support the movement agree there is always room for progress and physical improvement. Body positivity promotes eating healthy foods because they're beneficial for your body and give you energy, buying and wearing clothes that flatter the body you have now, and not punishing yourself if you slip up on your health journey; instead, knowing that no one is completely perfect and getting back on track.

While this movement has suffered a lot of criticism since its inception, it cannot be denied that it has helped countless people. My personal journey started with finally accepting that my body will never be the "ideal physique" because that simply does not exist. Everyone's ideal body is completely different, and the more accepting we are of that, the easier it is to be at peace with oneself.

Alternatively, if you simply cannot get behind the idea of this movement, you can also try "body liberation" or "body neutrality," which advocate taking your body out of the center of your self-image. Whatever works for you! We're all fighting an internal uphill battle. Let's keep working towards the inclusion and tolerance of all body types in an effort to improve the health of **everyone**. □



# RIGHTEOUS WRAP UP

BY RIGHTEOUS REG

**W**RESTLEMANIA WEEKEND HAS become the weekend to showcase not only “The Immortals,” but some of the best independent wrestling talent around. April 10 and 11 were set for the two-day WrestleMania 37, which would present some pretty historic matches and moments. But, starting April 8 at 11:59 p.m., I witnessed the best live wrestling show I have ever been to—For The Culture, presented by Game Changer Wrestling’s The Collective.

For The Culture is a show featuring wrestlers of color, especially Black wrestlers. It’s a card that I dreamed about watching when I first created the #BW500, my annual list of the top 500 Black wrestlers in the world.

I talked a little about the first For The Culture event in my article on AJ Gray [“Doing It For The Culture,” *PWI* January 2021], who, along with J-Rose, puts together these shows. Due to the pandemic, a lot of us weren’t able to attend the first one. But, with a vaccination on my part, and fans returning to WrestleMania weekend, it was time for many of us to experience For The Culture in person.

I attended my first wrestling show in 1994, a WWF

house show in my hometown of Bakersfield, California. When the wrestling boom hit in the late-’90s, WWF started having shows twice a year in my town, which I would attend every time. Been to nine WrestleManias, including this year’s. I’ve been to countless independent shows, including a couple where I wrestled (another story for another day). I experienced some of the best wrestling in my life at the American Legion Hall in Reseda, California, watching the current stars of today tear it up in Pro Wrestling Guerrilla. All that’s to say I’ve been to a *lot* of wrestling shows; and, far and away, For The Culture

was the best experience I’ve ever had.

A card headlined by the absolute legend 2 Cold Scorpio, taking on Impact World champion Rich Swann, this show was everything it was on paper and more. I’ve always wanted to attend a show where the wrestlers look like me, come out to entrance music that I know and love, to a crowd full of people that look like me, and present a style of wrestling that’s different than what everyone else is doing. For The Culture was just that.

From rapping along to the entrance music of AJ Gray, Bryan Keith, and Calvin Tankman, to dancing with both the main-eventers, Swann and Scorpio, as they entered to familiar tunes and got a tired crowd back into the show, For the Culture felt like a family reunion ... well, a Twitter family reunion, at least. I have never felt so connected to a wrestling audience as I did that night. So many faces that looked like mines in the crowd, some who had never seen live wrestling before, but were so excited to experience it together.

Every bout exceeded my expectations. The opening scramble



Darius Lockhart wrings the arm of Bryan Keith during their thrilling technical battle at GCW’s For The Culture 2.

PHOTO BY ROBERT STARKZ-BELLAMY





**Rich Swann executes 2 Cold Scorpio's signature 450 splash from the second rope for a near-fall. Swann would pin Scorpio shortly thereafter, following a Phoenix Splash—a fitting end to a card that Righteous Reg says is the best he's ever attended.**

showcased wrestlers from across the country: Mysterious Q, Alpha Zo, Troy Hollywood, D-Rogue, Robert Martyr, and AC Mack all excelled in a tough setting.

Impact's Kiera Hogan & Tasha Steelz put their Knockouts tag belts on the line against Willow Nightingale & Brooke Valentine (who replaced an injured, now-retired Faye Jackson) in a great match. The tag title being defended added another level of importance to the show.

Indie journeyman Jon Davis faced off against up-and-comer PB Smooth. The 6'9" Smooth is a trainee of Johnny Gargano with an impressive look. Davis has been destroying people on the independents for a long time, and I believe still has a big run with a major company in him.

In another exciting scramble, Myron Reed, Andy Brown, Frontman Jah, and Calvin Tankman squared off. Each one of these gentlemen has something special. Tankman—now competing in MLW—is one of my favorites to watch. He brought everything

he had to Tampa. The Mack truck-like force, the athleticism, the trash talk ... all on display.

Up next was my favorite match of the night, with Bryan Keith taking on Darius Lockhart. From the entrances to the intensity in the ring, this one was it. Keith is a hard-hitter who brings Texas grit to every match. Lockhart has some of the best promos in wrestling, and the way he incorporates Black history into everything he does is incredible. This was a technical back-and-forth with some of the hardest strikes of the show.

The night's youngest competitors, Tre' Lamar and Eli Knight, wowed us with quickness, innovation, and heart. Impact's Alex Shelley cites Lamar as one of the top rising stars in all of wrestling. Knight is only 19 years old, but moves like a veteran when that bell rings.

Next, AJ Gray entered to Waka Flocka Flame's "O Let's Do It," to face JTG, who, following a career resurgence over the last couple years, was ready to give Gray the fight of his life.

Gray is my number-one wrestler in the world right now. No one on the independents brings the intensity, striking, and believability like he does. He is a complete pro wrestler and is ready for the mainstream.

Gray and JTG put on one of the most exciting matches of the night. JTG fought like the veteran he is, and it took three of Gray's devastating lariats to keep him down.

Lio Rush vs. Lee Moriarty was everything you'd expect. These two engaged in a battle of counters, speed, agility, and one-upmanship—one of those "don't blink, you might miss something" affairs. You could tell both wrestlers did an extensive study on their opponent.

The perfect way to end the night was the main-event contest between 2 Cold Scorpio and Rich Swann. Many moves in Swann's arsenal are from the tree that Scorpio grew. In the early-'90s, Scorpio brought the 450 splash to American television, and, years later, Swann would innovate the standing 450 splash. So, to see them face off in a setting like this was the perfect way to end the night.

Everything you would want to see these two wrestlers do, they did. Even Scorpio being in his 50s didn't stop us from seeing multiple moonsaults and Tumbleweeds. Swann proved why he's in the position he's in, overwhelming the legend with a win. His post-match celebration wasn't just for the victory, but for this monumental night we all experienced.

I want to send a special thank-you to AJ Gray and J-Rose for the tremendous work they put into this show. I hope to see more shows like this where I feel so connected to the whole event. And I would like to see someone top the best live wrestling show I've ever been to. □



# THE W COLUMN

BY KRISTEN ASHLY

**A**S THE CO-FOUNDER of the women's wrestling website Bell to Belles, my role is to advocate, always looking for ways to empower women in wrestling. I developed "The W Column" for *PWI* for that reason: a recurring women's wrestling column with the mission to spotlight topics, wrestlers, and events that empower and embolden women's wrestling.

The Resistance Gallery is a well-known venue in London

known to host a slew of different events. Wrestling fans would know it best as ResGal: a place where boundaries were far and few between, and women's wrestling had a place to call home. In March 2021, ResGal announced it would close its doors permanently, leaving women's wrestling no choice but to move forward with nostalgia and remorse.

Garry Vanderhone, with the help of Greg Burrridge, opened ResGal in 2007 in a unique area in Bethnal

Green, in Greater London. Though booked as a venue for nearly any event one can imagine, ResGal found notoriety as a venue that held wrestling events and housed two popular wrestling schools—Lucha Britannia's London School of Lucha Libre and the EVE Academy. Since 2013, ResGal has been home to more than 100 events from 10 different wrestling promotions, all featuring some of the best talent Europe has to offer.

However, internationally speaking, ResGal is best known to women's wrestling fans for its connection to Pro Wrestling: EVE. What SHIMMER has done for women's wrestling in the U.S., EVE did in the U.K. by presenting matches that were low on gimmicks and high on action, featuring some of the most talented women wrestlers on the planet.

EVE ran its first event, *Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's Pro-Wrestling: EVE*, at the ResGal in late-2016. Since then, EVE owners Dann and Emily Read have booked over 60 events at the East End venue, later making the decision to locate their wrestling school, EVE Academy, in the same space. After first stepping foot in the raw, yet cozy building, with its exposed bricks, beams, and pipes, Dann Read knew EVE and ResGal were a perfect match.

"We went down to the ResGal and fell in love with the place," he recalled. "It suited everything that we were about. And that was that. I loved the fact that people would walk in, and they'd be like, 'Wow,' because it was so unique and so different."



PHOTO BY DALE BRODIE CREATIVE

Reigning Pro Wrestling: EVE champion Rhia O'Reilly exchanges words with Jetta at London's Resistance Gallery, affectionately known by EVE fans as ResGal.





**Japan's Emi Sakura stretches America's Solo Darling with a Mexican surfboard hold. Like the Eagles Club in Berwyn, Illinois, the ResGal became an international destination (and a second home) for the world's top women wrestlers.**

From that point on, ResGal became a destination for female wrestlers from around the world, athletes like Emi Sakura, Manami Toyota, Aja Kong, Tsukasa Fujimoto, Jazz, Mercedes Martinez, nearly every woman on the NXT U.K. roster, and standouts from just about every large promotion. Women who wrestled on the independent scene in other countries ran to EVE and ResGal, and immediately fell in love with the atmosphere—women like indie veteran Holidead.

"Anytime I went to that building, I knew I was going 'home,' and I've never felt that way about any place or company in wrestling before," she told *PWI*. "That's where EVE's girl gang resided, where the London School of Lucha Libre taught British strong style in the most welcoming environment of [any] wrestling school I have ever attended. It's not the venue alone, but the great people that encompassed it that always made

it feel like home for me, and gave me a longing of always wanting to return, or sadness when it was time to leave."

It's a sentiment many female wrestlers share, often speaking of their time there as if they were spending time with family. Dann Read recalled a time when joshi legend Emi Sakura spoke of her favorite part of wrestling at ResGal.

"I remember Emi saying to me that her favorite moments were us all at the ResGal, after the shows," he said. "Because, after the shows, when the fans would leave, I'd go out and I'd buy everyone dinner and I'd bring it all back to the ResGal. We'd set the tables up, set the chairs up, and we'd all sit around the tables and eat and whatnot, after the show. I remember Emi saying to us, 'As much as I love everything, this is always my favorite. I just love us all being together and chatting and talking.' And those days were really good. Those were really nice."

the future holds for the building, all that ResGal, the promoters, and the competitors did to move women's wrestling forward will carry on in the memories, camaraderie, and the hours of matches filmed inside. Though ResGal will never be replaced, the place that acted as a home for so many women in the business will live on in the stories of those who loved it best.

"Everyone has ResGal stories they can't tell, which is also part of the charm of the time there," Read said. "But, again, it's the people that really make it. It's more about the stories that we *can* tell."

All told, ResGal will be remembered, and ultimately missed, for empowering the talent and fans to just enjoy what they love without worry or fear.

"You never know what to expect working for a new company, especially in a new country," said Holidead. "But it was absolute badass girl power going on." □

When the pandemic hit, EVE and ResGal, like so many businesses, were forced to halt operations, leaving a hole in the women's wrestling scene that Read credited to the memories made at ResGal.

"The ResGal might have been the first of its kind, and it may be the last of its kind, but the people that made it? [They] will go on and will have whatever follows ResGal," he said. "One thing is for sure, that it will always be a story that needs to be told when it comes to the progression and evolution of women's professional wrestling. And the attitude ... especially the attitude."

Regardless of what



# TV BREAKDOWN

BY HARRY BURKETT

## FOCUS ON... IMPACT WRESTLING

### IMPACT VIEWER NUMBERS [AXS]

March 16: 146,000  
March 23: 116,000  
March 30: 149,000  
April 8: 168,000  
April 15: 132,000  
April 22: 145,000

**Analysis:** *Impact Wrestling* did what was necessary on April 8, delivering a stellar number—168,000 viewers—for its Thursday night debut on AXS-TV. While the move from Tuesday to Thursday was in the nick of time, considering *NXT* was about to relocate to Tuesday nights on April 13, *Impact* scored this figure against night two of *NXT*'s TakeOver: Stand & Deliver on Peacock. This also confirmed the importance of AEW World champion Kenny Omega, who became familiar to many American fans on New Japan's weekly program, which once aired Friday nights on AXS. Omega made his in-ring debut on *Impact*, teaming with The Good Brothers against *Impact* champion Rich Swann, Eddie Edwards, and Willie Mack.

### AEW WINS THE WAR

All Elite Wrestling needed to win the expectations game and garner at least one million viewers on Wednesday, April 14, the night after its chief competition—WWE's *NXT*—had moved to Tuesdays. AEW presented a blockbuster show, with Mike Tyson as the last-minute ringside enforcer for Chris Jericho's bout against Dax Harwood, and, in a subtle attempt to grab some WWE/*NXT* viewers, Matt Hardy challenged TNT champion Darby Allin in the main event.

AEW met its goal, as *Dynamite* scored an average of 1,219,000 viewers. *Pro Wrestling Torch* estimated that *Dynamite* drew 84 percent of *NXT*'s former viewers. *Dynamite* ranked number two in all of cable television among the

18- to 49-year-old demographic that night, with a rating of .44, behind MTV's reality competition show, *The Challenge*.

*Dynamite*'s overall number was still a couple hundred thousand short of its historic October 2, 2019, premiere, which earned over 1.4 million viewers.

Executive Vice President Cody Rhodes acknowledged that *Dynamite* has won the Wednesday Night War while being careful not to criticize the *NXT* product. And Chris Jericho, somewhat uncharacteristically, was humble in the glow of victory in recent media appearances, particularly on *Steve Austin's Broken Skull Sessions* on Peacock and *Busted Open* on SiriusXM.

Now, the attention turns to *Dynamite* vs. *Raw*. Without *NXT* to stymie *Dynamite*'s ratings potential, weekly comparisons will be made between the flagship programs of AEW and WWE, both in overall numbers and within the 18-49 demographic.

And how does that measure? *Raw* attracted 2.12 million viewers the night after WrestleMania Sunday, blowing out *Dynamite* for that week. Perhaps a more accurate comparison would be the week of April 19: *Raw* scored 1.9 million against *Dynamite*'s 1.1 million. Also, *Raw* was the number-one program in all of cable



Karrion Kross and Scarlett Bordeaux show off the NXT championship belt on April 13—the date the black-and-gold brand officially moved to Tuesday nights.

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in the 18-49 demo for that week, scoring .61 against *Dynamite*'s .37.

### **NXT IS A WINNER, TOO**

At least *NXT* won the last battle of the Wednesday Night War, drawing 768,000 viewers against *Dynamite*'s 688,000, thanks to night one of *NXT*'s TakeOver: Stand & Deliver special simulcast on USA and Peacock. Kind of anticlimactic, yes, but still an important footnote—much like the Battle of New Orleans, which actually occurred *after* the War of 1812.

The truth is *NXT* defeated *Dynamite* only 10 times despite 78 head-to-head match-ups.

Yet it's hard to call any major brand a loser, especially one drawing three-quarters of a million viewers each week.

*NXT* does need to work on raising its 18-49 rating, as it actually lost to

*Dynamite*—.28 to .22—in their final confrontation. By comparison, *Raw* scores well over .50 every week.

And *NXT*'s figures are rising with each passing week as of press time. After scoring an impressive 768,000 viewers for Stand & Deliver, *NXT* earned 805,000 on April 13 and 841,000 on April 20—and that was despite *Raw*'s number dropping the second Monday after WrestleMania.

Perhaps the industry is better off without the Wednesday Night War. With *Impact Wrestling* now on Thursdays, we now have a major wrestling program airing every weeknight—and all their numbers are trending upward.

### **MLW'S BIG MOVE**

Lost in the fallout of the Wednesday Night War was the announcement that Major League Wrestling would premiere on Vice TV in

early-May, most likely as a lead-in for Vice's hit documentary show, *Dark Side of the Ring*. With Vice available in 60 million households, compared to AXS's 50 million households, this could prove a threat to *Impact Wrestling* just as it's gaining some real momentum.

*Impact Wrestling* beats out *Dark Side of the Ring* by an average of only 2,000 viewers, according to [prowrestling.net](http://prowrestling.net).

Most fans currently access MLW's *Fusion* on YouTube, where episodes drop Wednesdays at 7 p.m. MLW's move to national cable puts it firmly in the secondary tier of major promotions, along with Impact and Ring of Honor.

### **HELL YEAH, A&E!**

It's probably no coincidence that Vice happens to be owned by A&E Networks, and A&E's April 18 installment of *Biography*, featuring Steve Austin, drew a tremendous number of viewers: 1,062,000. A&E has featured WWE stars as part of its *Biography* franchise for over 20 years, with bios on Austin, Hulk Hogan, Andre The Giant, and Owen Hart back in 2000.

This is actually the third "Stone Cold" biography to air on A&E. More profiles in the WWE Legends series will roll out each Sunday, featuring Roddy Piper, Randy Savage, Booker T, Shawn Michaels, Mick Foley, The Ultimate Warrior, and Bret Hart.

While some criticize the bios as being WWE-approved, the overall quality compensates for that. Joe Lavine, George Roy, Billy Corben, and Alfred Spellman—all veterans of ESPN's *30 for 30* series and various HBO sports documentaries—add cinematic flair and overall drama to these already compelling life stories.

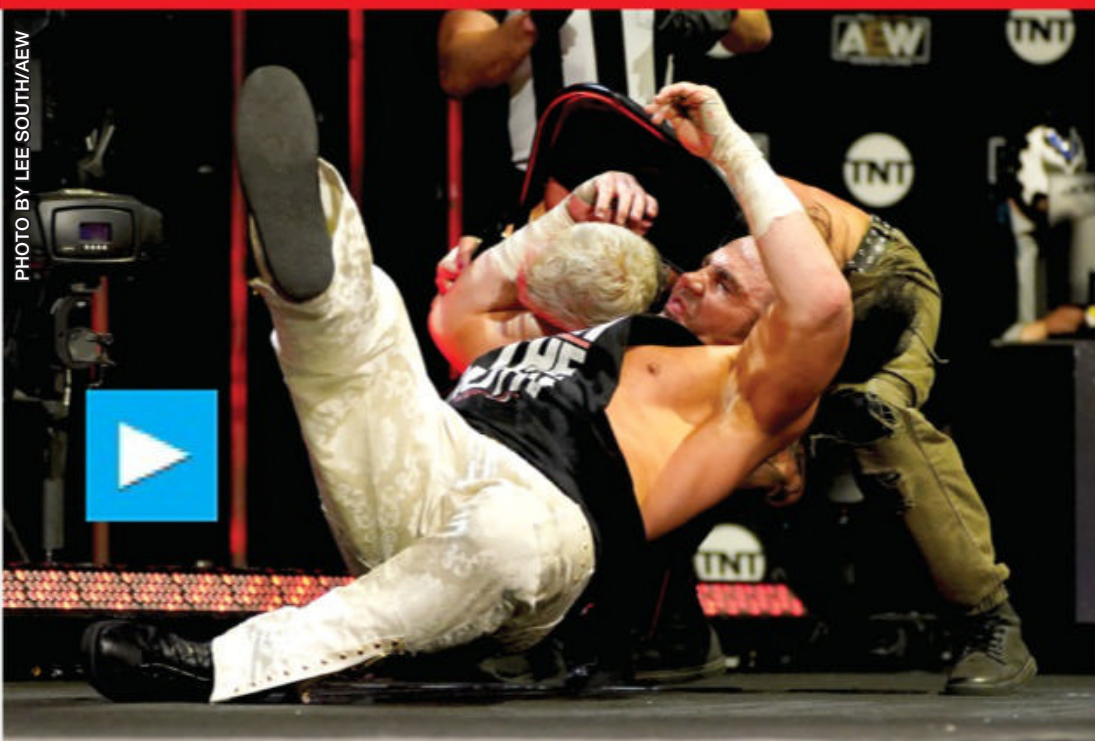
WWE's *Most Wanted Treasures* premiered immediately afterward at 10 p.m. Eastern, with Triple H, Stephanie McMahon, and other personalities searching North America for sports entertainment memorabilia. That program scored 766,000 viewers—very impressive. □

## **SPOTLIGHT MATCH**

### **DARBY ALLIN vs. MATT HARDY**

—AEW DYNAMITE, APRIL 14

Matt Hardy didn't come across as a manager, grizzled veteran, or backstage mentor, but a fiery competitor against TNT champion Darby Allin. Perhaps Jim Ross said it best: Hardy, in his 28th year in the sport, was facing Allin, who was 28 years of age. Despite the age difference, Hardy held the advantage for most of the match, but, perhaps appropriately, it was Allin who delivered a Coffin Drop from nearly 20 feet in the air to score the win during a crucial edition of *Dynamite*.





# INTERNATIONAL REPORT

BY WALTER YEATES

**S**INCE THE PREVIOUS edition of the “International Report” went to press, New Japan Pro-Wrestling has finished presenting its annual New Japan Cup. **Will Ospreay** would become the second English wrestler to win the tournament, following **Zack Sabre Jr.**, who shockingly won the tournament in 2018. On his way to claiming the cup, Ospreay gained victories over **Hiroyoshi Tenzan**, Zack Sabre Jr., **SANADA**, **David Finlay**, and, lastly, **Shingo Takagi** in the final.

Key tournament results saw **Jay White** defeat reigning NEVER openweight champion **Hiroshi Tanahashi** in the second round to lay claim to a future championship match. **EVIL** defeated current KOPW titleholder **Toru Yano** in the quarter-final round. As is tradition in NJPW tournament action, the non-title victory for EVIL also allowed him to lay claim to a championship match in the near future.

Ospreay would go on to challenge **Kota Ibushi** for the newly sanctioned IWGP World heavyweight championship on April 4 at Sakura Genesis. The new championship retains the lineage of the IWGP heavyweight championship and the IWGP Intercontinental championship. To the shock of many, Ospreay was able to defeat Ibushi and become the second official IWGP World heavyweight champion.

**Roppongi 3K** (**Sho** & **Yoh**) won the IWGP junior heavyweight tag team championship

for the fifth time, also on April 4 at Sakura Genesis, by defeating reigning IWGP junior heavyweight champion **El Desperado** & **Yoshinobu Kanemaru**. The match marked Yoh’s long-awaited return to the ring after a roughly nine-month absence due to an ACL tear.

At the time of this writing, New Japan is preparing for two major feature events dubbed **Wrestle Grand Slam**. The first takes place on May 15 at Yokohama Stadium, where the marquee bout features Will Ospreay defending the IWGP World heavyweight championship against Shingo Takagi. On May 29 at the Tokyo Dome, the marquee contest will feature the winner of Ospreay/Takagi taking on five-time former IWGP heavyweight champion **Kazuchika Okada**.

Chinese sports entertainment promotion **Middle Kingdom Wrestling** returned to YouTube on April 23 with the 21<sup>st</sup> episode of *Blast-Off*, continuing its push

to become an internationally known product. The promotion also took to Twitter to announce a collaborative event on May 25—emanating from the WeSpace venue in the Tencent Store—with the new IBEW promotion, entitled **IBEW x MKW: The Foundation**.

Revolution Pro Wrestling (RevPro) held the 10<sup>th</sup> installment of its **Epic Encounter** series on April



**Will Ospreay comes off the top rope with a somersault senton during the match where he'd dethrone Kota Ibushi as IWGP World heavyweight champion.**

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**Dan Moloney exchanges words with Mad Kurt at a taping of RevPro's Epic Encounters. The series of closed-set events has kept the company visible throughout the pandemic.**

25. At the event, **Kanji** defeated **Aleah James** in 9:47 to retain the Southside Women's championship. RevPro will return with Epic Encounters 11 on May 16. That event will feature **Bobbi Tyler** against Aleah James, continuing a program that has played out over several previous events. Epic Encounters 11 will also see **Mad Kurt** take on **Dan Moloney**. Mad Kurt defeated Moloney during Epic Encounters 4 on October 25, 2020, and has taken numerous jabs at his rival on Twitter since his victory.

As of the writing of this piece, All Japan Pro Wrestling is in the midst of its yearly Champion Carnival tournament. The April 25 show from Shin-Kiba 1st Ring saw **Jake Lee** defeat 2020 Champion Carnival winner **Zeus** to move to eight points in the headline match (15:50). **Kento Miyahara** defeated the reigning Triple Crown champion **Suwama** in the marquee (20:51). Earlier in the event, **CIMA** had

a successful V2 defense of the AJPW World junior heavyweight championship. He was able to defeat **Hikaru Sato**.

On April 4, World Wonder Ring Stardom held Yokohama Dream Cinderella 2021. The headline and marquee matches saw **Tam Nakano** make a successful V1 defense of the Wonder of Stardom Championship by defeating **Natsupoi** (18:50), **Utami Hayashishita** record a successful V4 defense of the World of Stardom championship against **Bea Priestley** (20:53), and an all-Donna del Mondo match, in which **Giulia & Syuri** defeated champions **Himeka & Maika** (28:57) to win the Goddess of Stardom championship. This was the third title defense for the duo of Himeka & Maika.

Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre continues to run pay-per-view events in Mexico City in an attempt to gain revenue lost due to the canceling of numerous

events in the wake of COVID-19, along with other events scattered through the week. Mexico City remains in code red, meaning CMLL cannot yet run events with fans at either of its usual venues in the city (Arena Mexico and Arena Coliseo).

In what seems like peculiar timing, CMLL announced just before press time that it has severed official ties with Ring of Honor. The working relationship had previously allowed for some contracted wrestlers to compete for both promotions, including former ROH champion **Matt Taven**. Current Ring of Honor World champion **RUSH**, who formerly worked for CMLL, is now affiliated with Lucha Libre AAA.

NJPW's STRONG brand recently saw **Tom Lawlor** win the U.S. version of New Japan Cup 2021, claiming the STRONG openweight championship in the process. His victory over **Brody King** in the finals cemented Lawlor as being on top of the brand. The leader of Team Filthy remains undefeated in singles competition since debuting in NJPW. The April 23 episode of *NJPW Strong* also saw **Wheeler YUTA** make his New Japan debut, looking impressive even in defeat against **Rocky Romero**.

On April 25, NJPW roster members **FinJuice** (David Finlay & **Juice Robinson**) retained the Impact World tag team championship at the Rebellion pay-per-view by defeating **The Good Brothers** (**Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson**), who, despite being based in the U.S., are billed from Tokyo, Japan—a nod to their success in NJPW as one of the company's most internationally renowned heavyweight tag teams. □



# INDEPENDENT ROUNDUP

BY ANDREA HANGST

**L**AST FEBRUARY, **RICKEY Shane Page** used the numbers to his advantage, leveraging his 440H faction to defeat **Nick Gage** and hold onto the Game Changer Wrestling championship. In the months that followed, Page ducked Gage at every turn, effectively choosing when and against whom he'd defend his title. The COVID-19 pandemic then put indie wrestling, GCW included, on a degree of pause. But, by summer, outdoor shows were a common workaround. It seemed like in short order, Gage would be afforded the revenge he was seeking.

However, a calf injury that subsequently required surgery halted Gage's pursuit last July. Though a matter of "when" and not "if" he'd get his shot at Page and a chance to recapture his gold, the date itself was pushed into some unknown night into the future. But, finally, at 440H! Presents rSpring Break (the event itself taken over by RSP's faction after founder **Joey Janela** fell to Page earlier this year in a Championship vs. Spring Break match) during WrestleMania week in Tampa, Gage got his long-due rematch.

With light tubes and glass lining the ring—and a menacing scaffolding structure overlooking it—Gage and a white-clad Page had the deathmatch blowout befitting what has arguably been the hottest rivalry in indie wrestling over the past year-plus. When the (light tube) dust (literally) settled, "The King" was back on top of his

throne, and he readied himself to celebrate with the crowd in the Cuban Club parking lot.

**Jon Moxley**, however, had other plans for Gage. Moxley, the former AEW World champion, is no stranger to Gage; the two met in the ring over a decade ago in CZW. And, apparently, he is not through with Gage ... nor his deathmatch past. Moxley confronted Gage in the ring before the celebration could begin, and the two brawled. Then, Moxley leveled the GCW champion with a Death Rider DDT. The two will inevitably meet later this year in a rematch fans have clamored for since Moxley has displayed his willingness to return to his indie roots despite his AEW pedigree.

Gage versus Page with a Moxley twist was but one of the numerous highlights of GCW's The Collective—a dozen shows taking place during WrestleMania week in an attempt to push pro wrestling closer back to normal. Those shows juxtaposed another dozen-plus held under the IWTV "Showcase Of The Indies" banner, those held at Tampa's 81Bay Brewing Company. While the week in Tampa/Ybor City wasn't as big as past 'Mania-adjacent festivities—where up to 90 events took place outside of WWE's umbrella—the smaller footprint helped keep shows as safe as possible, while still bringing fans the indie experience they've become used to during WrestleMania week.



PHOTO BY EARL GARDNER

For the first time in many years, Nick Gage and Jon Moxley found themselves face to face. Indie wrestling fans worldwide are now itching to see them square off for the Game Changer Wrestling championship.



IWTV Independent Wrestling champ Lee Moriarty had a remarkable WrestleMania week, winning six out of eight singles bouts over the course of various events.



PHOTO BY DANIEL MOORE/JOERMEDIA

The Collective served up fan favorites. Moxley headlined **Josh Barnett's** Bloodsport 6, falling to Barnett in the main event. Effy's Big Gay Brunch featured **Ace Perry** challenging **Effy** to regain possession of his own soul—ultimately getting it gifted back to him despite a loss. **Edith Surreal**—easily one of the standout performers of the whole weekend, both in the GCW-backed events and at IWTV's Showcases—picked up a win over **Devon Monroe**. And, in a bloody main event, **AJ Gray** bested **Billy Dixon** in a Pup Collar Match (think Dog Collar, but, in Effy's words, "Make It Gayer").

For The Culture also returned at The Collective, serving up a pair of dream matches to share the main event. **Lee Moriarty** defeated **Lio Rush**, while Impact champ **Rich Swann** got the win over the seemingly ageless **2 Cold Scorpio**. The two-night GCW Acid Cup tournament concluded with **Jordan Oliver** taking out Moriarty to further bolster his growing reputation. **SHLAK** chose to resort to biting the foot of **Super Beast** at

Bloodsport 6, leading to a bizarre disqualification. And, beyond the Gage-Page main event, Spring Break also featured Joey Janela picking up a shocking win over longtime friend-turned-blood-rival **Chris Dickinson**, Rich Swann defeating Lee Moriarty, and **Virgil** showing up, then turning on **Gregory Iron** to help Effy get the win.

IWTV's Showcase of the Indies kicked off with the two-part IWTV Family Reunion. Part one had a heavy focus on the IWTV Independent Wrestling championship. Current titleholder Lee Moriarty made his first defense, retaining against Edith Surreal, who earned her #1 contender status by way of winning the Cassandra Cup. A new top contender was also revealed, by way of **Wheeler YUTA** defeating **Adam Priest**. YUTA then went on to attack Moriarty after his win over Surreal. Part two featured **Gary Jay** defeating **Billie Starkz** and **Daniel Garcia** successfully defending his C4/Limitless Wrestling belt against **Kevin Ku**.

At ACTION/Southern Underground Pro's Have Fun, Be Sad, AJ Gray retained his SUP Bonestorm championship against **JD Drake**; **Arik Royal** picked up a win over **Daniel Makabe**; and, in the main event, NJPW/Impact tag team **FinJuice** (**David Finlay** & **Juice Robinson**) defeated **Violence Is Forever** (**Dominic Garrini** & Kevin Ku) in a rare indie outing. Meanwhile, at Beyond Wrestling's Time Capsule, Lee Moriarty gained yet another challenger for his IWTV gold, with **Dave Cole** winning a #1 contender tournament by defeating **Anthony Stone**, **Dan Barry**, and Gary Jay in a four-way final.

Moriarty should have a busy summer as the defending Independent Wrestling champ (assuming he can retain). And, just as at last October's Collective events in Indianapolis, Moriarty also had one of the busiest WrestleMania weeks this year. Coming off of winning the inaugural Enjoy Cup title in the tournament final against **MV Young**, Moriarty ended up wrestling in nine bouts between the Showcase of the Indies and The Collective. That includes three matches on the second night of the Acid Cup 3 tournament, the win over Lio Rush, the loss to Rich Swann, and an appearance in **Faye Jackson's** Grey Sweatpants Battle Royal (ultimately won by **JTG**).

Moriarty also has Joey Janela ahead on May 1 at GCW's Ashes to Ashes, before his scheduled clash with Wheeler YUTA, currently set for May 6.

While the indies are nowhere near back to normal, both GCW's The Collective and IWTV's Showcase of the Independents managed to feel more like the indie WrestleMania experience of the last few years (2020 excluded). Though smaller in scope, it still made for a week packed with wall-to-wall independent wrestling options. □



# SPECIAL REPORT

# A SHOW FOR ALL

## CREATING A MORE ACCESSIBLE INDEPENDENT WRESTLING SCENE

TEXT BY ASHLEY MORRIS

"I CAN HONESTLY say wrestling has saved my life," said Dakarai Barnes, a wrestling fan and vocal advocate for accessibility within the industry. "I started watching wrestling around the age of 10, flipping through channels a few months after my mother passed away. I discovered these high-flying, non-stop, absolutely incredible athletes doing things I never imagined, called TNA, and, from then, I was hooked."

For Barnes and many other fans with disabilities, pro wrestling is not only entertainment, but also a needed catharsis. However, it's not always easy for

these fans to attend shows. While larger venues—the kind that host WWE and AEW events—usually have accessible entry and seating accommodations, disabled wrestling enthusiasts sometimes find themselves sitting alone, away from their friends and family. With independent promotions, the situation is often worse, as smaller venues and non-traditional spaces are more likely to lack things like wheelchair ramps, elevators, and accessible seating.

"Independent wrestling likes to pride itself on 'wrestling is for everyone,' but, unfortunately, the majority of the disabled community feels excluded from the 'everyone' part of the slogan," said Barnes.



In the first 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, promoters were forced to adapt to a new reality, while simultaneously considering the future of the business with fans eventually returning. These considerations shed light on what would be needed to return to fan-packed arenas, high school gymnasiums, local bars, and social halls—considerations that are not solely limited to the adherence of social distancing protocols and requirements.

In 2019, before the pandemic began, Dakarai Barnes attended a taping of Beyond Wrestling's weekly *Uncharted Territory* streaming series, which had needed to relocate from the Electric Haze (a hookah bar and music venue) to the historic White Eagle—a Worcester, Massachusetts, pub housed in a 19th-century building. After confirming with Beyond that the new venue was not wheelchair-accessible, Barnes says he opted to attend anyway, planning to figure out a way to watch the show once he arrived. Ultimately, a quartet of strong wrestlers used a fireman's carry to lift Barnes up the stairs to the second floor, where the show was being presented.

"Unfortunately, the strain on my body of having to get carried was too much, so I reached out to Beyond about potentially changing venues [in the future]," Barnes said. "They were very understanding and nice during the conversation. The only thing that kind of made me seem like it wasn't that big of a priority was when I was asked to find a list of accessible venues. Although I didn't mind, my thoughts were, if I have to do it for one promotion, will I have to do it for every promotion I want to attend?"

During the pandemic, Beyond temporarily shut down, returning with its first empty-arena shows earlier this year (including the February 14 Iron Match, sponsored by *PWI*) before finally allowing fans this spring.

"When they started running shows again recently and it was right back at White Eagle, I was kind of upset after almost a year-plus," said Barnes. "They either couldn't find an accessible venue or didn't try. Since bringing it up last year, I've had multiple disabled wrestling fans who reached out to share that they don't even bother to try attending shows anymore because of the inaccessibility in all of independent wrestling."

"Every other venue we run besides White Eagle is wheelchair-accessible, however, due to the pan-

demic, we are unable to host events at any of those venues for the time being," said Drew Cordeiro, owner of Beyond. "White Eagle Hall was built in the 1840s, and the first floor is fully accessible. Unfortunately, due to the size of the ring, we can only stage our events on the second floor, and, due to the age of the building, there is no solution at this time to easily transport wheelchairs ringside."

To be sure, COVID-19 has made live events a major challenge, and indie wrestling fans with disabilities find themselves at a particular disadvantage. While a large promotion with a televised, nationally syndicated product and multiple revenue streams can remain relatively flexible in presenting its product, smaller independent organizations that depend largely on live fans must consider regularly how *all* fans can witness and participate in their shows.

After a career wrestling under the name Jacey North on the independent circuit, Matt Griffin founded ACTION Wrestling in 2018 with the sole purpose of providing all fans with the opportunity to see a great wrestling show. "Wrestling is for everybody, that is something I believe," Griffin told *PWI*. "Wrestling can and should be enjoyed by any person and fan in any age group, race, gender, sex, or ability, which absolutely means trying to accommodate as best as we can for everyone."

Griffin, who has worked with the Make-A-Wish Foundation for eight years, has garnered a reputation for accommodating fans, specifically those with disabilities.

"I would say that for the most part, my experiences with independent wrestling have been positive," said Jonathan Miller, a disabled fan of ACTION Wrestling. "The only time where we [ever] really had any difficulty was sort of a last-minute, spur-of-the-moment trip. I have generally found that, for the most part, most people will take care of you if you reach out in advance. I also realize that it helps to have a good personal relationship built in with the promotions."

Taking care of disabled and differently abled fans often means choosing venues with disabled parking and accessible bathrooms, seating that allows for clear and reasonable viewing of the show, and elevator access for shows that take place in multi-floored buildings. In some cases, it also means finding the appropriate lighting and sound systems for fans with autism or related sensory concerns.



Accommodating disabled fans is not always an exact science. Promoters must also consider a variety of factors outside of their control, including financial limitations. Often, as in Beyond's case, accessibility concerns are correlated with venues that can accommodate the size of the ring, lighting and sound needs, and anticipated size of the crowd based on the show's line-up. Add to that the revenue needed to pay associated fees with producing a show, and many promoters walk a fine line in attempting to provide all fans with an enjoyable experience.

"As a promoter, you want to make sure everything is accessible for your fans, but you also have to think logistically," Griffin said. "What would it look like if we were offered a venue that was incredible and we were able to get a ring in, but no access for all our fans?"

Such is the situation with Beyond Wrestling and The White Eagle. "I have spoken with the owners and managers, who have done extensive renovations on the building this last year," said Drew Cordeiro. "They said that it is something they are aware of and want to rectify when they have the means to."

And, for his part, Dakarai Barnes says he wants to see Beyond succeed with an accessible venue. "My first experience at Beyond Wrestling was fantastic," Barnes said. "They were incredible in making sure I had a fantastic time, made sure my friend was able to stay with me the whole time, easy access to the bar and merch stands. And, although the bathroom wasn't totally accessible, they seated me close enough where I didn't have to maneuver through a bunch of people to get there."

Currently, various state and local COVID-19 restrictions further limit promoters' options. An outside show may be ideal in many ways pertaining to accessibility, but hosting at the whim of unpredictable weather conditions can also put the health and well-being of fans and talent at risk.

Still, Jonathan Miller remains hopeful for the future of accessibility in independent wrestling. "As we reach a sense of normalcy, I hope that promoters consider the accessibility of venues more strongly in the future," he said. "At our core, disabled fans

aren't looking for special treatment. All we really want is to enjoy the show and be given the same respect given to every other fan."

As a promoter, Griffin echoes a similar sentiment he often shares with fellow promoters. "The toughest part about listening to fans is that, at times, the business doesn't move as fast as we would like it," he said. "But one thing we can do moving forward is to continue to thank fans for their support by providing a product they feel comfortable investing their time and money into."

Griffin also added that appealing to a broader base simply makes good business sense. "Smart promoters are not trying to exclude people," he said.

As a fan plugged in to concerns of accessibility, Barnes shares that belief. "To the promoters out there who are doing it right and are truly accessible for all, I'd recommend advertising you're fully accessible and disabled fans are welcomed," he said. "You'd be surprised how many disabled fans are waiting to attend your show!"


And, for promoters who are still unsure where to begin, Barnes would like to help. "This is my call to all promoters reading this: My DMs on Twitter (@BarnesPumba) are open for any promoter who wants to figure out the best way to make their shows accessible." ■



**Jonathan Miller and his father (seen in the front row, both clad in red tees) enjoy the in-ring entertainment of ACTION Wrestling—a promotion that prides itself on being accessible to all fans.**



# REMEMBER HER?



Later a two-time WWE Women's champion, **Molly Holly** was first introduced to WCW fans as "Miss Madness," one of Randy Savage's three valets (along with Madusa and Gorgeous George). A gifted in-ring performer who is still widely respected by her peers, she was the first inductee announced for WWE's 2021 Hall of Fame class.

PHOTO BY BILL APTER



# ARENA REPORTS

We encourage promoters and readers to e-mail results to:

**PWIResults@yahoo.com**

Please try to utilize the exact format you see in the "Arena Reports." Also, please distinguish between handicap matches and three- or four-way matches. And, when reporting the result of a handicap match, indicate the number of competitors and who was the last man eliminated. Finally, please note pinfall finishes. Following these guidelines will help us greatly and make it more likely that your report will be used.

## SPOTLIGHT CARD OF THE MONTH

### FLORIDA

**TAMPA—ACTION Wrestling/Southern Underground Pro's Have Fun, Be Sad at 81Bay Brewing:** SUP Bonestorm champion **AJ Gray** beat **JD Drake** to retain ... **Suge D** & **Kevin Ryan** beat **Cabana Man Dan** & **Brett Ison** ... **Damyan Tangra** won a scramble match including **Bobby Flaco**, **Liam Gray**, **Adrian Alanis**, **Jaden Newman**, **Graham Bell**, and **Rob Killjoy** ... **AC Mack** pinned **Myron Reed** ... **Arik Royal** defeated **Daniel Makabe** ... **Adam Priest** pinned **Matt Makowski** ... **O'Shay Edwards** beat **Jon Davis** ... **Nolan Edward** beat **Angelus Layne** in an unsanctioned match ... **FinJuice** defeated **Violence Is Forever**. (4-9-21)

—Spotlight photos by Daniel Moore/JOBR Media

The teamwork of **Dominic Garrini** & **Kevin Ku (Violence Is Forever)** is impressive, but it wasn't enough to defeat **Impact tag champions David Finlay** & **Juice Robinson**.

retain the title ... **Kevin Owens** pinned **Sami Zayn** ... **Sheamus** pinned U.S. champion **Riddle** to win the title ... Intercontinental champion **Apollo Crews** pinned **Big E** in a Nigerian Drum Fight to retain the title ... **Rhea Ripley** pinned Raw Women's champion **Asuka** to win the title ... Universal champion **Roman Reigns** defeated **Daniel Bryan** and **Edge** in a triple-threat to retain. (04-11-21)

—Kristen Ashly



Daily's Place: **The Butcher** won a 15-man battle royal, last eliminating **Lance Archer** ... **Maxwell Jacob Friedman**, **Cash Wheeler**, **Dax Harwood**, & **Shawn Spears** defeated **Jungle Boy**, **Luchasaurus**, **Marko Stunt**, & **Dante Martin** ... **Jade Cargill** beat **Reka Tehaka** ... **Orange Cassidy**, **Chuck Taylor**, & **Trent** defeated **Max Caster**, **Angelico**, & **Jack Evans** ... **Eddie Kingston** beat **Cezar Bononi** ... **Hikaru Shida**, **Red Velvet**, **Ryo Mizunami**, & **Tay Conti** defeated **Britt Baker**, **Nyla Rose**, **Rebel**, & **The Bunny** ... **PAC**, **Pentagon Jr.**, **Rey Fenix**, and **Matt & Mike Sydal** defeated **Kenny Omega**, **Konosuke Takeshita**, **Michael Nakazawa**, and **Matt & Nick Jackson**. (04-09-21)

—Kevin McElvaney

### FLORIDA

**TAMPA—WWE WrestleMania, Night Two** at Raymond James Stadium: **Randy Orton** pinned **The Fiend** ... Women's tag team champions **Nia Jax** & **Shayna Baszler** beat **Natalya** & **Tamina** to

**TAMPA—WWE WrestleMania, Night One** at Raymond James Stadium: **WWE World champion Bobby Lashley** defeated **Drew McIntyre** by submission to retain the title ... **Natalya** & **Tamina** won Tag Team Turmoil, last eliminating

**ACTION Wrestling champion Arik Royal stretches Daniel Makabe during their hard-hitting, non-title encounter (which Royal would ultimately win).**



**Liv Morgan** & **Ruby Riott** ... **Cesaro** pinned **Seth Rollins** ... **AJ Styles** & **Omos** beat Raw tag team champions **Kofi Kingston** & **Xavier Woods** to win the title ... **Braun Strowman** pinned **Shane McMahon** in a steel cage match ... **Bad Bunny** & **Damian Priest** beat **John Morrison** & **The Miz** ... **Bianca Belair** pinned Smackdown Women's champion **Sasha Banks** to win the title. (04-10-21)

—Al Castle

**JACKSONVILLE—All Elite Wrestling's The House Always Wins** at

**YBOR CITY—GCW For The Culture 2** at Cuban Club: **Troy Hollywood** won a six-person scramble featuring **AC Mack**, **Alpha Zo**, **D-Rogue**, **Mysterious Q**, and **Robert Martyr** ... Knockouts tag team champions **Kiera Hogan** & **Tasha Steelz** defeated **Brooke Valentine** & **Willow Nightingale** to retain the title ... **Calvin Tankman** defeated **Andy Brown**, **Frontman Jah**, and **Myron Reed** in a four-way match ... **Darius Lockhart** defeated **Bryan Keith** ... **Tre' Lamar** beat **Eli Knight** ... **AJ Gray** pinned **JTG** ... **Lee Moriarty** defeated **Lio Rush** ... **Rich Swann** pinned **2 Cold Scorpio**. (04-08-21)

—Righteous Reg





**Have Fun, Be Sad** kicked off with a title bout between SUP Bonestorm champ AJ Gray (right) and JD Drake (left). This heavyweight slugfest ended after Gray connected with his signature lariat.

## GEORGIA

**ROME**—KLT Superstars Fan Fest at KLT Arena: **Tony Atlas** won a 20-man battle royal ... **Bryce Cannon** & **Cornelius Pepperbottom** wrestled **Old Chic Donovan** & **Mike Jackson** to a double-countout ... **Miranda Gordy** pinned **Charlie Punk** ... **Sunny Daze** & **Lord Humongous** defeated **Kyle Matthews** & **Nate Wilde** ... Champion **Zach Mosley** defeated **Jordan Kingsley**, **Plowboy**, **Roma Miller**, and **Crash Test Dummy** in a five-person Kendos, Ladders, & Tables match to retain the title ... **Randy Tucker**, **Zero**, **Rude Boy**, **Johnny Kaos**, & **Shawn Ambrose** defeated **Mr. Atlanta #2**, **Rawhead Rex**, **Stu Valentine**, **War Daddy**, **Todd Zane**, & **Anthony Phillips III** in a Battle Chamber Match. (04-24-21)

—Brett Wolverton

## ILLINOIS

**VILLA PARK**—AAW Wrestling at the Galli Arena: **Joeasa** pinned **Dante Leon** ... **Brayden Lee** pinned **Ace Perry** ... **Skye Blue** pinned **Hyan** ... Heritage champion **Hakim Zane** defeated **Cole Carter** by submission ... **PACO** defeated **Gringo Loco**, **Jake Landers**, & **Nick King** in a four-way ... Heavyweight champion **Mance Warner** pinned **Manders** ... **Ren Jones** pinned **Damian Chambers** ... **Allysin Kay** pinned **Ray Lyn** ... **Matt Justice** pinned **Gary Jay** ... **Fred Yehi** defeated **Travis Titan** by submission ... **Allie Katch** pinned **Heather Reckless** ... **Russ Jones** defeated **Axel Rico** & **Rico De La Vega** in a handicap match ... **Ace Austin** pinned **Jake Crist** ... **Myron Reed** pinned Heritage champion **Hakim Zane** to win the title. (04-03-21)

—Leonard Brand

## MICHIGAN

**LAMBERTVILLE**—Ruthless Pro Wrestling at the VFW Hall: **Sherman Walker** pinned **Kenny Urban** ... **Hoodfoot**

defeated **Schwartz**, **Randi West**, **Arthur McArthur**, and **Sidney Von England** in a scramble ... **Justin Kyle** pinned **Paxton Calloway** ... **Dread King Logan** & **Mitch Hewitt** defeated **Otis Cogar** & **Lord Crewe** ... **Blue Dragon** defeated **Charlie Krue** by submission ... **Zach Thomas** defeated **Jason Page** and **Sage Phillips** in a triple-threat ... **Aaron Orion** wrestled **Austin Manix** to a no-contest ... **Aaron Williams** & **Gary Jay** defeated **Dominic Garrini** & **Kevin Ku** ... **Mickie Knuckles** defeated **Herzog** and **Mathias Thrasher** in a triple-threat ... **Dale Patricks** pinned **Josh Crane** to become the first Death Match champion. (04-24-21)

—Leonard Brand

## MISSOURI

**ST. LOUIS**—WrestleMax STL at The Red Flag: **Rahim De La Suede** beat **Moses**, **ATM**, and **Ryu Kendrick** in a four-way ... **Kevin Lee Davidson** wrestled **Moonshine Mantell** to a no-contest ... **Brooke Valentine** defeated **Blair Onyx** ... **Jah-C** won a gauntlet including **Camaro Jackson**, **Edvin Kudic**, **Levi Everett**, **Devon Monroe**, and **Chris Hendrix** ... *The David Lee Memorial Tournament—Quarterfinals:* **Mat Fitchett** pinned **Anthony Gutierrez** ... **JDX** defeated **Jah-C** ... **Calvin Tankman** beat **Jake Something** ... **Mike Outlaw** defeated **Xavier Walker** by countout; *Semifinals:*

**JDX** pinned **Mat Fitchett** ... **Mike Outlaw** beat **Calvin Tankman**; *Final:* **Mike Outlaw** pinned **JDX** to win the vacant **STL River City** title. (04-03-2021)

—Patrick Brandmeyer

## NEW JERSEY

**WILLIAMSTOWN**—Intergender Bonanza 8 at H2O Wrestle Center: **Marcus Mathers** defeated **Zoey Skye** ... **Chris Bradley** & **Kristian Ross** defeated **Happy Hour** & **Frankie Pickard** ... **Victoria Pop** beat **Finneus James** ... **The Runway** beat **Jeff Cannonball** & **Billy Avery** in a Fashionista Street Fight ... **Adena Steele** defeated **CHAD** ... **Kennedi Copeland** beat **Sean Henderson** ... **Stan Stylez** defeated **Ava Everett** ... **Marcus Mathers** defeated **Marc Angel** and Intergender Bonanza Super champion **Ray Lyn** to win the title. (04-25-21)

—Stan Stylez

## SOUTH CAROLINA

**COLUMBIA**—WrestleForce at Polliwogs ... **Chance Rizer** pinned **Jax N'Sane** ... **Cruizer Lewis** pinned **Kevin Phoenix** ... **Jake Jacobs** pinned **T.J. Kincaid** ... **OSCW Intercontinental champion Brandon Paradise** pinned **Stacey Sykes** to retain ... **Austyn Bebop** pinned **Matt Odam** ... **Chase Lovelace** pinned **Nick Kismet** ... **Deon Johnson** & **Sweet Dreamz** defeated **T.J. Boss** & **Zuka King**, **Tommy K'Jango** & **Chris Valo**, and **Nicky Michaels** & **Antonio Morgan** in a four-team elimination match ... **Derrick Driver** pinned **Myric Moore**. (04-18-21)

—Brett Wolverton



**Matt Makowski is in agony as opponent Adam Priest locks in a tight abdominal stretch.**



# THE WAY IT WAS

BY BRIAN SOLOMON

**W**ITH THE TRAGIC passing some three months ago of Jim Crockett Jr., many longtime wrestling fans were suddenly reminded of cherished memories of one of the greatest professional wrestling companies to ever do business. It's no secret that Jim Crockett Promotions received heavy coverage in the pages of the Stanley Weston family of wrestling magazines—especially during the mid-to-late 1980s, a time when our writers and photographers had been unceremoniously locked out of covering Vince McMahon's WWF product. But, while necessity made bedfellows of London Publishing and JCP, there is also no denying that the brand of wrestling Crockett produced had long been regarded as among the best the industry had to offer. That was a reputation built on decades of good faith, unparalleled action, and some of the most hard-working performers to ever lace up a pair of boots.

First established in 1931 by "Big" Jim Crockett Sr., a longtime promoter of concerts, plays, minor league baseball, and other forms of sports and entertainment throughout the Carolinas and Virginia, pro wrestling was only part of the promotional efforts of the new company. At the time, the wrestling industry was rather disorganized and in a constant state of war. But things settled down with the formation of the National

Wrestling Alliance in 1948. Just four years later, Crockett became a member, and the owner of the NWA's designated Mid-Atlantic territory.

In those days, the organization, known to the public as Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling, was predominantly a tag team-based territory, and longtime fans still recall the incredible work of teams like Rip Hawk & Swede Hanson, George Becker & Johnny Weaver, and, of course, Gene, Lars, & Ole Anderson, a.k.a. The Minnesota Wrecking Crew. These tandems helped establish the modern-day tag team wrestling style. But when Jim Crockett Sr. died in 1973, and left the company to his children Frances, Jackie, David, and Jim Jr., big changes were afoot.

Jim Crockett Jr. quickly stepped to the forefront of the organization, bringing in visionary booker (and former Mid-Atlantic headliner) George Scott to shake things up. They quickly switched gears to

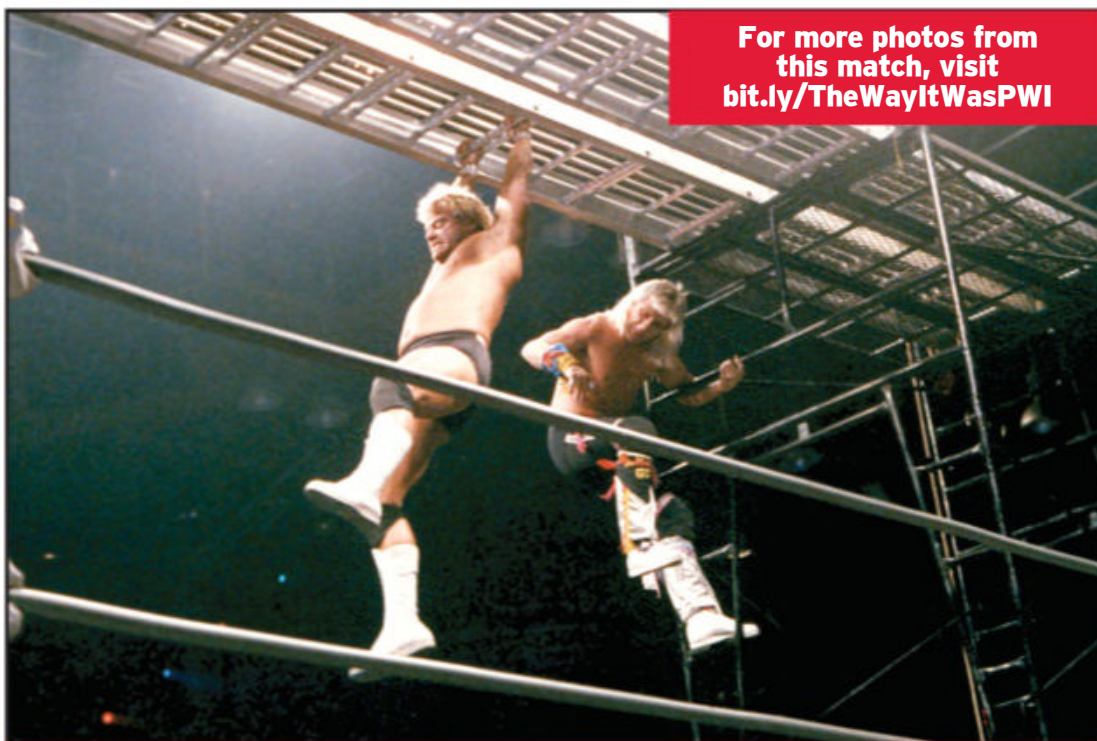
put the focus on singles competition, first bringing in established draws like Johnny Valentine and Wahoo McDaniel, whose hard-hitting wars became the stuff of legend, and then grooming new superstars to take the company forward, like Ricky Steamboat and the greatest Crockett performer of them all, former AWA greenhorn and future NWA World champion Ric Flair. In 1975, Crockett and Scott introduced the United States



PHOTO BY DUANE LONG

**At 1985's Battle of the Belts in Tampa, Wahoo McDaniel is admonished by the official during his best-of-three-falls bout with NWA World champion Ric Flair. Two years later, the once-red hot Championship Wrestling from Florida was absorbed by Crockett Promotions.**





For more photos from  
this match, visit  
[bit.ly/TheWayItWasPWI](http://bit.ly/TheWayItWasPWI)

**As Stan Lane holds on for dear life, Ricky Morton prepares to deliver the kick that will send him crashing to the canvas below. The scaffold match between the Midnight Express and Rock 'n' Roll Express at Starrcade 1987 is a lasting reminder of the wild action offered by JCP in the late-'80s.**

title as the new top championship of the territory—this title lives on today as the WWE United States championship. They also kicked off the long-running *Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling* TV show out of the WRAL TV studios in Raleigh, North Carolina (and later WPCQ studios in Charlotte), hosted by former WRAL weatherman Bob Caudle, who would become the voice of the promotion.

The 1980s would be the most tumultuous decade in wrestling history, and it began with Crockett making inroads toward expanding his operation, years before Vince McMahon would try the same thing with the WWF. Expanding into Ohio, West Virginia, and even upstate New York, he also formed a partnership with Toronto promoter Frank Tunney, thus bringing his stars to the Maple Leaf Gardens.

When the WWF did start its national expansion, Crockett was readier for the competition than any other rival. Having Ric Flair as the new NWA World champion gave him great political power, and

the impetus to create Starrcade—wrestling's first annual mega-event, first broadcast from the Greensboro Coliseum (the stronghold of Crockett Promotions) on Thanksgiving 1983.

After the WWF got chased off TBS in the beginning of 1985, Crockett was there to swoop in and take over the 6:05 Saturday night timeslot occupied by *World Championship Wrestling*, flagship show of Ted Turner's cable powerhouse. Crockett now had national cable exposure, and used it to make stars like Nikita Koloff, The Road Warriors, The Rock 'n' Roll Express, The Midnight Express, and Magnum T.A. into household names, as well as to showcase arguably the greatest heel stable in the history of the sport, the infamous Four Horsemen.

Expanding into arenas all over the country, and even consolidating dying territories like St. Louis, Florida, Central States, and Bill Watts' UWF, JCP became a legitimate rival to the WWF for national domination. As the NWA territorial system

collapsed around him, Crockett, one of its last stalwarts, even took to presenting his own product not as "Mid-Atlantic," but simply "the NWA"—which is how so many fans who enjoyed that golden era still remember it to this day.

The rough-edged, blood-and-guts, adult-oriented action of JCP provided a strong alternative to McMahon's more family-friendly stuff, allowing Crockett to remain competitive for a few years. New events like The Great American Bash tour and TBS' bi-monthly Clash of the Champions (an answer to the WWF's *Saturday Night's Main Event*) followed. But Crockett's expansion was spreading him very thin financially, and McMahon's stranglehold on the pop culture consciousness was eventually too much to handle.

By 1988, the organization was bleeding money; on the verge of bankruptcy, Crockett made the incredibly tough choice to sell his company outright to Ted Turner, who kept it on TBS and transformed it into what would soon become known as WCW.

It was a crushing defeat, and Jim Crockett Jr. would never again return to the national wrestling scene. But, despite the fact that he lost the wrestling war, he remains known as Vince McMahon's most worthy opponent of that era. And his brand of entertainment is still held up today by fans of athletic, intense, and serious-minded pro wrestling as the very best that the business can be.

Whether they realize it or not, wrestling purists and die-hard superfans owe Jim Crockett Jr. an enormous debt of gratitude. But that's nothing that the fans lucky enough to grow up in the Carolinas and Virginia don't already know. □



# PWI OFFICIAL RATINGS

FOR PERIOD ENDED  
APRIL 25, 2021

## HEAVYWEIGHT

- 1 KENNY OMEGA**  
203, Winnipeg, MB  
(2) AEW/Impact/AAA champion
- 2 BOBBY LASHLEY**  
273, Colorado Springs, CO  
(1) WWE U.S. champion
- 3 ROMAN REIGNS**  
265, Pensacola, FL  
(4) WWE Universal champion
- 4 WILL OSPREAY**  
231, Essex, U.K.  
(-) IWGP World champion
- 5 KARRION KROSS**  
265, New York, NY  
(-) NXT heavyweight champion
- 6 JACOB FATU**  
300, Samoa  
(8) MLW heavyweight champion
- 7 RUSH**  
240, Jalisco, Mexico  
(-) ROH World champion
- 8 KEIJI MUTO**  
243, Yamanashi, Japan  
(8) GHC heavyweight champion
- 9 NICK ALDIS**  
242, King's Lynn, U.K.  
(-) NWA World champion
- 10 RICH SWANN**  
200, Baltimore, MD  
(5) Former Impact champion

## WOMEN

- 1 BIANCA BELAIR**  
134, Knoxville, TN  
(6) Smackdown Women's champion
- 2 RHEA RIPLEY**  
137, Adelaide, Australia  
(-) Raw Women's champion
- 3 RAQUEL GONZALEZ**  
176, Rio Grande Valley, TX  
(-) NXT Women's champion
- 4 SYURI**  
128, Kanagawa, Japan  
(10) Stardom SWA champ
- 5 DEONNA PURRAZZO**  
112, Livingston, NJ  
(-) Knockouts champion
- 6 HIKARU SHIDA**  
126, Kanagawa, Japan  
(4) AEW Women's champion
- 7 TAM NAKANO**  
124, Aichi, Japan  
(3) Wonder of Stardom champion
- 8 UTAMI HAYASHISHITA**  
142, Kagoshima, Japan  
(1) World of Stardom champion
- 9 BRITT BAKER**  
135, Pittsburgh, PA  
(-) #1 contender AEW Women
- 10 JADE CARGILL**  
160, Vero Beach, FL  
(-) Undefeated in AEW

## TAG TEAMS

- 1 MATT & NICK JACKSON**  
Combined weight: 350 pounds  
(1) AEW tag team champions
- 2 DAVID FINLAY & JUICE ROBINSON**  
Combined weight: 429 pounds  
(6) Impact tag team champions
- 3 NIA JAX & SHAYNA BASZLER**  
Combined weight: 422 pounds  
(3) WWE Women's tag team champions
- 4 TAMA TONGA & TANGA LOA**  
Combined weight: 430 pounds  
(2) IWGP tag team champions
- 5 DOLPH ZIGGLER & ROBERT ROODE**  
Combined weight: 453 pounds  
(7) Smackdown tag team champions
- 6 NASH CARTER & WES LEE**  
Combined weight: 366 pounds  
(-) NXT tag team champions
- 7 CHRISTOPHER DANIELS & FRANKIE KAZARIAN**  
Combined weight: 434 pounds  
(-) #1 contenders AEW tag title
- 8 LA PARK & EL HIJO DE LA PARK**  
Combined weight: 420 pounds  
(9) MLW tag team champions
- 9 JORDYNNE GRACE & RACHAEL ELLERING**  
Combined weight: 301 pounds  
(-) Impact Knockouts tag champs
- 10 GIULIA & SYURI**  
Combined weight: 234 pounds  
(-) Goddess of Stardom champions

## WWE RAW

Champion:  
**BOBBY LASHLEY**  
(C) 273, Colorado Springs, CO

- 1—SHEAMUS  
(5) 267, Dublin, Ireland
- 2—DREW MCINTYRE  
(1) 265, Ayr, Scotland
- 3—BRAUN STROWMAN  
(-) 385, Sherrills Ford, NC
- 4—RIDDLE  
(3) 216, Las Vegas, NV
- 5—DAMIAN PRIEST  
(6) 249, New York, NY
- 6—XAVIER WOODS  
(10) 205, Atlanta, GA
- 7—RANDY ORTON  
(8) 250, St. Louis, MO
- 8—KOFI KINGSTON  
(-) 212, Ghana, West Africa
- 9—THE MIZ  
(7) 221, Parma, OH
- 10—ELIAS  
(-) 217, Pittsburgh, PA

## SMACKDOWN

Champion:  
**ROMAN REIGNS**  
(C) 265, Pensacola, FL

- 1—APOLLO CREWS  
(9) 240, Sacramento, CA
- 2—CESARO  
(3) 232, Lucerne, CH
- 3—DANIEL BRYAN  
(2) 210, Aberdeen, WA
- 4—BIG E  
(1) 285, Tampa, FL
- 5—KEVIN OWENS  
(5) 266, Marieville, QC
- 6—EDGE  
(-) 241, Toronto, ON
- 7—KING CORBIN  
(8) 275, Kansas City, MO
- 8—REY MYSTERIO  
(10) 175, San Diego, CA
- 9—SETH ROLLINS  
(-) 217, Davenport, IA
- 10—SAMI ZAYN  
(4) 212, Montreal, QC

## AEW

Champion:  
**KENNY OMEGA**  
(-) 203, Winnipeg, MB

- 1—DARBY ALLIN  
(1) 180, Seattle, WA
- 2—ADAM PAGE  
(9) 228, Aaron's Creek, VA
- 3—CHRISTIAN CAGE  
(-) 212, Toronto, ON
- 4—SCORPIO SKY  
(6) 205, Los Angeles, CA
- 5—JON MOXLEY  
(2) 224, Cincinnati, OH
- 6—CODY RHODES  
(4) 220, Atlanta, GA
- 7—BRIAN CAGE  
(3) 278, Chico, CA
- 8—MJF  
(5) 216, Plainview, NY
- 9—CHRIS JERICHO  
(8) 227, Winnipeg, MB
- 10—STING  
(10) 250, Venice Beach, CA

## IMPACT

Champion:  
**KENNY OMEGA**  
(-) 203, Winnipeg, MB

- 1—JOSH ALEXANDER  
(4) 240, Bolton, ON
- 2—RICH SWANN  
(C) 200, Baltimore, MD
- 3—ACE AUSTIN  
(1) 190, Atlantic City, NJ
- 4—SAMI CALLIHAN  
(-) 216, Dayton, OH
- 5—BRIAN MYERS  
(8) 223, Glen Cove, NY
- 6—TREY MIGUEL  
(6) 170, Toledo, OH
- 7—ROHIT RAJU  
(7) 172, Saginaw, MI
- 8—TJP  
(3) 167, The Philippines
- 9—ERIC YOUNG  
(-) 232, Nashville, TN
- 10—MATT CARDONA  
(-) 224, Long Island, NY

## ROH

Champion:  
**RUSH**  
(C) 240, Jalisco, Mexico

- 1—TRACY WILLIAMS  
(5) 190, Brooklyn, NY
- 2—JONATHAN GRESHAM  
(2) 175, Atlanta, GA
- 3—DRAGON LEE  
(1) 214, Jalisco, Mexico
- 4—SHANE TAYLOR  
(6) 315, Cleveland, OH
- 5—DALTON CASTLE  
(9) 217, Albany, NY
- 6—BRODY KING  
(3) 285, Los Angeles
- 7—JOSH WOODS  
(6) 220, West Palm Beach
- 8—JAY LETHAL  
(8) 215, Elizabeth, NJ
- 9—FRED YEHI  
(-) 207, Waterloo, IA
- 10—BRIAN JOHNSON  
(-) 202, Philadelphia, PA



Ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or tag team. Unless submitted by promoters, ratings are compiled by a committee consisting of Kevin McElvaney, Pat Laprade, Kris Zellner, Louie Dee, Harry Burkett, Jason McVeigh, and STRIGGA (cagematch.net, purolove.com). The numbers in parenthesis indicate a wrestler's position in that category last issue.



RUSH

**ALL JAPAN PRO WRESTLING:** CHAMPION—Suwama; 1—Jake Lee; 2—Kohei Sato; 3—Kento Miyahara; 4—CIMA; 5—Zeus; 6—Shuji Ishikawa; 7—Yuma Aoyagi; 8—Koji Iwamoto; 9—Hokuto Omori; 10—Hikaru Sato

**GAME CHANGER WRESTLING:** CHAMPION—Nick Gage; 1—Alex Colon; 2—Jordan Oliver; 3—Lee Moriarty; 4—Rickey Shane Page; 5—AJ Gray; 6—Lio Rush; 7—Mance Warner; 8—Rich Swann; 9—Ken Broadway; 10—Effy

**INSANE CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING:** CHAMPION—Noam Dar; 1—Kez Evans; 2—Craig Anthony; 3—BT Gunn; 4—Leyton Buzzard; 5—DCT; 6—Dez Black; 7—Jason Reed; 8—Andy Wild; 9—Jack Jester; 10—Stevie Boy

**NATIONAL WRESTLING ALLIANCE:** CHAMPION—Nick Aldis; 1—The Pope; 2—Chris Adonis; 3—Aron Stevens; 4—Trevor Murdoch; 5—Tyrus; 6—Fred Rosser; 7—JR Kratos; 8—Slice Boogie; 9—Tim Storm; 10—Saul Rinaro

**NXT U.K.:** CHAMPION—WALTER; 1—A-Kid; 2—Ilja Dragunov; 3—Rampage Brown; 4—

Joe Coffey; 5—Jack Starz; 6—Nathan Frazier; 7—Tyler Bate; 8—Teoman; 9—Joseph Conners; 10—Kenny Williams

**PRO WRESTLING NOAH:** CHAMPION—Keiji Muto; 1—Masa Kitamiya; 2—Kazuyuki Fujita; 3—Atsushi Kotoge; 4—Takashi Sugiyama; 5—Katsuhiko Nakajima; 6—Hayata; 7—Yoshinari Ogawa; 8—Kaito Kiyomiya; 9—Nioh; 10—Nosawa Rongai

**PROGRESS WRESTING:** CHAMPION—Cara Noir; 1—Chris Ridgeway; 2—Spike Trivet; 3—Luke Jacobs; 4—Warren Banks; 5—Kid Lykos; 6—Ethan Allen; 7—Danny Black; 8—Jordan Breaks; 9—Kid Lykos II; 10—Chuck Mambo

**WESTSIDE XTREME WRESTLING:** CHAMPION—Marius Al-Ani; 1—Bobby Gunns; 2—Norman Harras; 3—Robert Dreissker; 4—Tristan Archer; 5—Michael Knight; 6—Anil Marik; 7—Senza Volto; 8—Levaniei; 9—Hektor Invictus; 10—Fast Time Moodo

**WORLD WONDER RING STARDOM:** CHAMPION—Utami Hayashishita; 1—Syuri; 2—Tam Nakano; 3—Giulia; 4—Hina; 5—Momo Watanabe; 6—Unagi Sayaka; 7—Natsupoi; 8—Konami; 9—Mayu Iwatani; 10—Saya Iida

## NXT

Champion:  
**KARRION KROSS**  
(5) 265, New York, NY

1—**JOHNNY GARGANO**  
(1) 199, Cleveland, OH

2—**FINN BALOR**  
(C) 190, Bray, Ireland

3—**BRONSON REED**  
(7) 330, Adelaide, Aus

4—**TOMMASO CIAMPA**  
(4) 201, Milwaukee, WI

5—**TIMOTHY THATCHER**  
(3) 228, Sacramento, CA

6—**KUSHIDA**  
(2) 187, Tokyo, Japan

7—**KYLE O'REILLY**  
(-) 200, Vancouver, BC

8—**PETE DUNNE**  
(-) 221, Birmingham, U.K.

9—**DEXTER LUMIS**  
(9) 238, Jacksonville, FL

10—**ADAM COLE**  
(8) 210, Panama City, FL

## CMLL

Champion:  
**ULTIMO GUERRERO**  
(-) 205, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

1—**DIAMANTE AZUL**  
(-) 214, Mexico City

2—**EL CARISTICO**  
(-) 180, Mexico City

3—**VOLADOR JR.**  
(-) 192, Monclova, Mexico

4—**SOBERANO JR.**  
(-) 165, Torreon, Mexico

5—**TITAN**  
(-) 187, Guadalajara, Mexico

6—**NIEBLA ROJA**  
(-) 185, Torreon, Mexico

7—**STUKA JR.**  
(-) 185, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

8—**EL CAVERNARIO**  
(-) 196, Zapopan, Mexico

9—**EL CUATRERO**  
(-) 207, Lagos de Moreno

10—**MISTICO**  
(-) 167, Tala, Mexico

## NEW JAPAN

Champion:  
**WILL OSPREAY**  
(-) 231, Essex, U.K.

1—**SHINGO TAKAGI**  
(4) 212, Yamanashi, Japan

2—**HIROSHI TANAHASHI**  
(2) 223, Gifu, Japan

3—**EL DESPERADO**  
(3) 198, Niigata, Japan

4—**JAY WHITE**  
(5) 220, Auckland, NZ

5—**TETSUYA NAITO**  
(1) 225, Tokyo, Japan

6—**KENTA**  
(-) 187, Saitama, Japan

7—**TORU YANO**  
(6) 253, Tokyo, Japan

8—**TAIJI ISHIMORI**  
(-) 165, Miyagi, Japan

9—**SANADA**  
(-) 220, Niigata, Japan

10—**AARON HENARE**  
(-) 231, Auckland, NZ

## MLW

Champion:  
**JACOB FATU**  
(C) 300, Samoa

1—**ALEX HAMMERSTONE**  
(1) 251, Phoenix, AZ

2—**TOM LAWLOR**  
(2) 205, Las Vegas, NV

3—**LIO RUSH**  
(4) 160, Los Angeles

4—**MADS KRUGGER**  
(5) UNK, UNK

5—**RICHARD HOLLIDAY**  
(6) 237, Westport, CT

6—**MIL MUERTES**  
(7) 255, UNK, UNK

7—**MYRON REED**  
(8) 173, Louisville, KY

8—**CALVIN TANKMAN**  
(9) 355, Indianapolis, IN

9—**ROSS VON ERICH**  
(-) 220, Kauai, HI

10—**ROCKY ROMERO**  
(-) 180, Havana, Cuba

## INDEPENDENT

Champion:  
**LEE MORIARTY**  
(C) 185, Pittsburgh, PA

1—**WHEELER YUTA**  
(10) 190, Philadelphia, PA

2—**DANIEL GARCIA**  
(7) 187, Buffalo, NY

3—**JOHN WAYNE MURDOCH**  
(1) 220, Waxahachie, TX

4—**DEREK NEAL**  
(5) 240, Bowling Green, KY

5—**TRISH ADORA**  
(3) 175, Washington, D.C.

6—**MATT MAKOWSKI**  
(-) 218, Philadelphia, PA

7—**ALEX KANE**  
(-) 235, Villa Rica, GA

8—**MYSTERIOUS Q**  
(8) 240, New Orleans, LA

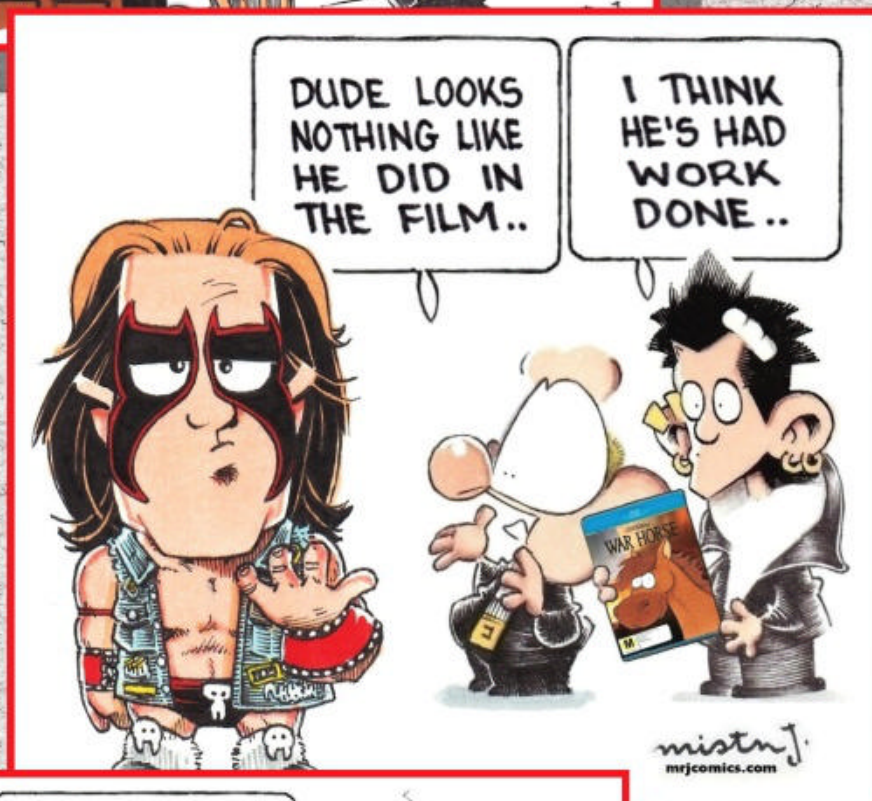
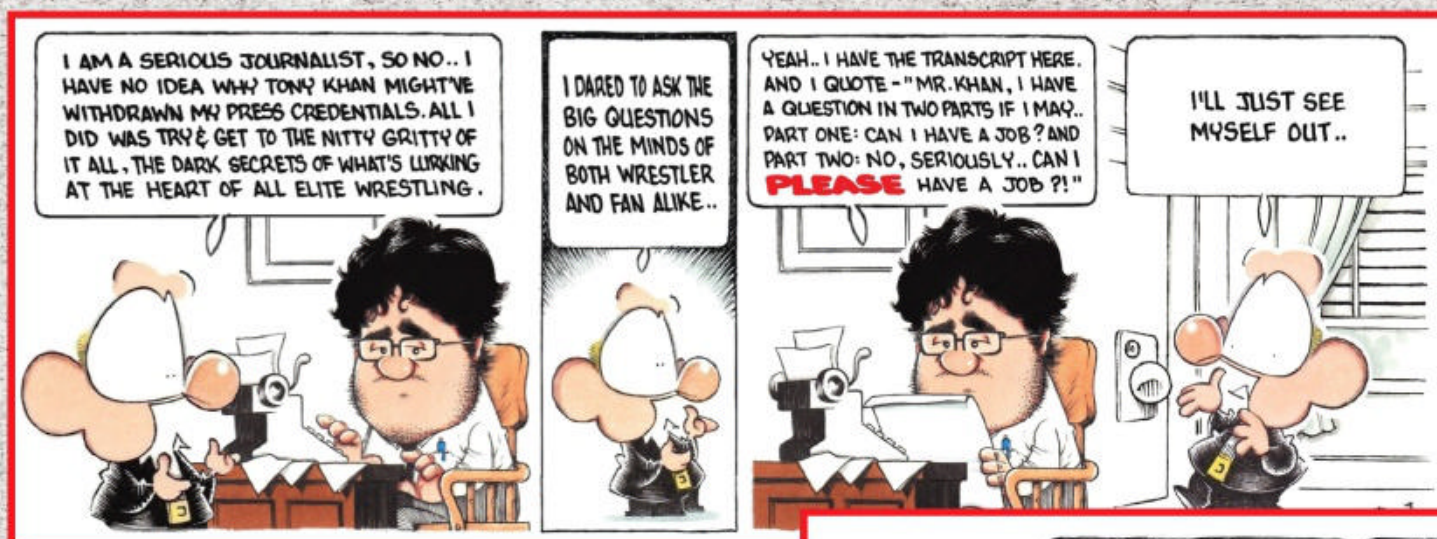
9—**AJ GRAY**  
(4) 240, Nashville, TN

10—**ARIK ROYAL**  
(-) 265, Riverside, CA



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BY JASON CONLAN







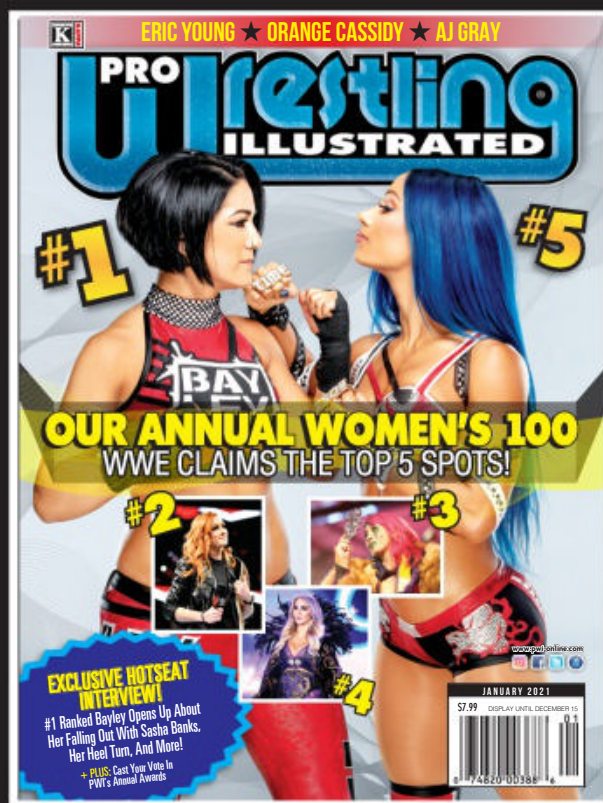
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